

## Introduction

Before identifying, in this introduction, the specific gap regarding Strauss's scholarship on Islamic thought in the secondary literature, it is worth presenting, briefly, Strauss's intellectual biography in its connection with his interest in Islamic political thought. To this end, this introduction will provide a brief, panoramic discussion of the major questions at the heart of Strauss's intellectual odyssey by focusing on what one might call the four pillars of Strauss's philosophical project: (1) Reason and Revelation, (2) Ancients and Moderns, (3) The Theologico-Political Problem, and (4) Esotericism. This will be done while emphasizing the Islamic aspect of Strauss's thought, of course, by relying on the vast existing literature on Strauss's thought, to which I owe much. One obvious point which must nonetheless be articulated explicitly is that this presentation does *not* presume to be an exhaustive introduction to the work of Leo Strauss. Such introductions have been attempted by other scholars, to which I invite curious readers to turn by consulting the footnotes.

### STRAUSS'S TURN TOWARD THE FALĀSIFA

Leo Strauss was born to an observant Jewish family in Kirchhain, Hessen, Germany on September 20, 1899. After graduating from gymnasium in 1917, he served briefly in the First World War in the German army; after the war, he began his studies at the University of Hamburg, where he conducted his doctoral dissertation under the direction of Ernst Cassirer on *The Problem of Knowledge in the Philosophical Teaching*

of F.H. Jacobi (1921).<sup>1</sup> It is worthwhile to pause to examine this early scholarly effort. Although the dissertation was never published in full by Strauss, one would expect to hear much about Jacobi in Strauss's later writings.<sup>2</sup> But this is precisely what does not happen. Particularly significant, however, is that one can identify some of the key components of the whole of Strauss's thought, in a nascent state, already present in his doctoral dissertation. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819), a German philosopher whose name is closely bound with the coining of the term “nihilism” and his role in the famous controversy on pantheism (*Pantheismusstreit*), played an important role in the formation of German philosophy through his attack on the pedigree of Spinoza's philosophy and the figure of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. The story begins with the controversial reception of Spinoza in Germany as an atheistic philosopher, but it took a 1785 publication by Jacobi to transform the debate on the reception of Spinoza in Germany into a full-fledged intellectual crisis, to which luminaries like Kant, Goethe, and Herder, among many others, contributed.<sup>3</sup> The controversy concerned above all the status of the Enlightenment as a project founded on the authority of reason, which claimed to provide an effective foundation for moral and religious

<sup>1</sup> The German original is available in GS II:237–93. For the extract of the dissertation in English see Leo Strauss, “The Dissertation (1921),” in *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings (1921–32)*, trans. Michael Zank (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 53–61. For the French translation see Leo Strauss, “Le problème de la connaissance dans la doctrine philosophique de Fr. H. Jacobi (I),” trans. Hans Hartje and Pierre Guglielmina, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 99, no. 3 (1994): 291–311; Leo Strauss, “Le problème de la connaissance dans la doctrine philosophique de Fr. H. Jacobi (II) b) Les formes données de la connaissance,” trans. Hans Hartje and Pierre Guglielmina, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 99, no. 4 (1994): 505–32.

<sup>2</sup> If I am not mistaken, Jacobi is only mentioned twice in Strauss's later writings: once in Spinoza's *Critique of Religion* and once in the 1964 Preface to the English translation of the same book: Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 16, 204 (GS I:31, 260). One should, of course, also mention the prominent place occupied by Jacobi in Strauss's introductions to the writings of Mendelssohn. See Leo Strauss, *On Moses Mendelssohn*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), (GS II:467–605). See also Leo Strauss, “Notes on Philosophy and Revelation,” in *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, ed. Heinrich Meier, trans. Marcus Brainard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 178.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel “Atwill,”* trans. George di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 173–251. A lively and authoritative account of the controversy is Frederick C. Besier, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 44–109. See also Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss. Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 67–71.

judgments and beliefs. In his explosive writing, Jacobi gives the account of his dialogue with Lessing and claimed that Lessing was a follower of Spinoza – a controversial claim because of the atheistic connotations attached to Spinoza's name. Jacobi saw the association with Spinoza as the convincing evidence for the rejection of *Aufklärung* and its rational basis. He claimed that the rationalist Enlightenment, represented in the philosophy of Spinoza, undermines the foundations of religion, morality, and thought, and inevitably leads to atheism, immorality, denial of the existence of God, relativism, and skepticism regarding the basic premises of every system of thought; or, in one word, to nihilism. Facing the impotence of reason for establishing the foundations of thought, morality, and religion, Jacobi saw only one solution: a leap of faith out of nihilism brought about by the rationalism of the Enlightenment and instead founding one's life and thought on faith through a return to orthodoxy and Christianity. Strauss wrote his dissertation on this controversial figure with all the concomitant issues related to this early interest, such as his later concern with the crisis of modern rationality and the conflict between Reason and Revelation.

After his doctoral dissertation, Strauss spent some time in Freiburg, Giessen, and Marburg. At the University of Freiburg, he came under the influence of Edmund Husserl and the young Martin Heidegger, before being employed from 1925 to 1932 at the Academy of Jewish Research in Berlin (Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums) as a research assistant, where he worked (1925–28) on his first book, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1930). What precise role Jacobi's ideas play in Strauss's mature philosophical approach has been an object of controversy which cannot be dealt with here in detail.<sup>4</sup> Two things, however, are rather clear. First, his doctoral dissertation on Jacobi led Strauss to Spinoza, and his study

<sup>4</sup> John G. Gunnell, "Strauss before Straussianism. Reason, Revelation, and Nature," *The Review of Politics* 53, no. 1 (1991): 53–74; Susan Meld Shell, "Taking Evil Seriously: Schmitt's 'Concept of the Political' and Strauss's 'True Politics,'" in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, eds. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), pp. 175–93; David Janssens, "The Problem of the Enlightenment: Strauss, Jacobi, and the Pantheism Controversy," *The Review of Metaphysics* 56, no. 3 (2003): 605–31; Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 65–83; Rodrigo Chacón, "On a Forgotten Kind of Grounding: Strauss, Jacobi, and the Phenomenological Critique of Modern Rationalism," *The Review of Politics* 76, no. 4 (2014): 589–617; Corine Pelluchon, *Leo Strauss and the Crisis of Rationalism: Another Reason, Another Enlightenment*, trans. Robert Howse (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 31–57; Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World Wars* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 73–139.

on Spinoza already manifests two pillars of Strauss's thought – to which I shall turn shortly. Second, as we shall see, it is not difficult to see at least a certain “family resemblance” between Strauss's major intellectual concerns and issues at the heart of Jacobi's controversy, although one should be careful not to take Jacobi's rather radical positions for Strauss's complex views, which seem to elude any kind of simple identification. In our discussion of Strauss's pillars of thought, the reader is strongly advised to remain vigilant of remaining satisfied with these short descriptions; there is much debate and many contradictory ideas about Strauss's final thoughts on any of the four following issues, the debates which are well represented in the more general studies.<sup>5</sup>

(1) *Reason and Revelation*. In his study on Spinoza, Strauss is concerned with the truth of Spinoza's critique of revealed religion and its defensibility from the philosophical point of view; he shows that Spinoza in particular and the Enlightenment's rationalist critique of religion in general did not succeed in presenting a definitive refutation of the claims of Biblical religion and revelation. Strauss claims that Spinoza's critique of religion is based on presuppositions which are vulnerable to the religious position which consistently founds itself on faith and questions the availability of its religious knowledge to human reason. Spinoza's efforts, therefore, in showing the contradictory character of the Scripture, are vulnerable to an orthodox counterattack which relies on the idea of an unfathomable, omnipotent God who is not bound as such to the rules and limitations of nature. Strauss claimed that the victory of modern rationalism over the revealed religion is more the effect of propaganda and rhetoric, “laughter and mockery,” than real philosophic and rational arguments. Spinoza and his followers, Strauss concluded, instead of relying on real rational refutation, overcame revealed religion without meeting its most unassailable defenses: all they did was “to ‘laugh’ orthodoxy out of a position from which it could not be dislodged by any proofs supplied by Scripture or by reason.”<sup>6</sup> The idea, according to which the claims of revealed religion are not as weak as its rationalist modern opponents have pretended them to be, and that one cannot easily imagine an

<sup>5</sup> For a good overview of the major debates on Strauss's legacy and thought and bibliography see Michael Zuckert and Catherine Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 58–80, 228–69; Michael Zuckert and Catherine Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 311–38.

<sup>6</sup> Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 28–29 (GS I:50–51).

effective refutation of a coherent religious perspective founded on faith in an omnipotent and unfathomable god, occupies a special place in Strauss's intellectual biography. It is reflected in the idea of an irreconcilable opposition between reason and faith, also represented by the conflict of Reason and Revelation, philosophy and religion, or Athens and Jerusalem. Strauss often claimed that this opposition cannot be overcome by any "Thomistic" synthesis of Reason and Revelation. He did not tire of repeating that in every synthesis of this kind, "however impressive, one of the two opposed elements is sacrificed, more or less subtly but in any event surely to the other." He also stated that neither of these two antagonists "has ever succeeded in really refuting the other" and they both remain contending representatives of two opposed camps.<sup>7</sup>

(2) *Ancients and Moderns*. Strauss's dissatisfaction with Spinoza's philosophy and his modern successors was only the first step in his journey from modern philosophy toward premodern thinkers. This is reflected in his lifelong enterprise of renewing what he, imitating the language of the seventeenth-century literary debate, sometimes calls "the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns," the debate which seemed to have been undoubtedly decided in the favor of the moderns.<sup>8</sup> The idea of the superiority of the moderns to the ancients as reflected in the concept of progress is one of the most cherished ideas of modern thought and modern man: the belief in the gradual advance in all fields of human life, from technology and politics to arts and philosophy. The fact that even today, what is considered "new" automatically acquires a positive connotation manifests the still-living universal attachment to the idea of progress. Strauss was, however, skeptical of the superiority of our thought to that of the premodern thinkers or ancients, and he shows this in many of his writings.<sup>9</sup> In his *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, for instance, his major writing

<sup>7</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 74–75; Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 270.

<sup>8</sup> Leo Strauss, "On the Basis of Hobbes' Political Philosophy," in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959), 172; Leo Strauss and Karl Löwith, "Correspondence between Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss Concerning Modernity," *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1988): 106 (Letter to Karl Löwith on August 15, 1946, GS III:661); Susan Meld Shell, ed., *The Strauss-Krüger Correspondence: Returning to Plato through Kant* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 47 (Letter to Gerhard Krüger on December 12, 1932, GS III:414).

<sup>9</sup> Strauss, "Progress or Return?"; Leo Strauss, "How to Study Medieval Philosophy," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (1996): 321–38.

on the one he considered to be the originator of modern political philosophy, Strauss investigates the legitimacy of Machiavelli's break with the premodern "Great Tradition" and his founding of "the Enlightenment" and inquires whether the Enlightenment deserves its name or "whether its true name is Obfuscation."<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, he goes even so far as to claim that "the perfect political order, as Plato and Aristotle have sketched it, *is* the perfect political order" and that it is "*morally-politically* the most reasonable and most pleasing."<sup>11</sup>

Strauss's dissatisfaction with the modern critique of revelation, and his doubts about the legitimacy of the modern project as a whole, did not immediately lead him to what he later on called classical political philosophy, as it is found primarily in the writings of Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle. If seen primarily through his publications, Strauss's interest in the ancients appears relatively late, as his first publication on a classical philosopher is the 1939 essay "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon."<sup>12</sup> Strauss seems to have initially entertained the idea of a return to premodern thought through Maimonides, one of Spinoza's antagonists discussed in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, as well as through other Jewish medieval thinkers. In this period, the premodern thought of Greek philosophers appears more as a resource for understanding medieval Jewish thought. Apart from this Jewish orientation in Strauss's research, his writings after his book on Spinoza also have a modern component, reflected in his studies on Thomas Hobbes.<sup>13</sup> Even in these studies, Greek philosophy occupies a marginal place as a probable source of some of Hobbes's ideas. In a letter, Strauss depicts his dual research program during this period in the following way:

My studies of Spinoza's *Theological and Political Treatise* have shown me a connection between the theological and political problem. These studies have led me to Spinoza's Jewish medieval predecessors, especially Maimonides, on the one hand, and Hobbes' political science on the other hand. During the pursuit of these sources, I formed the plan to make 1. the political science of Hobbes and

<sup>10</sup> Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1958), 173.

<sup>11</sup> Strauss and Löwith, "Correspondence between Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss Concerning Modernity," 107 (Letter to Karl Löwith on August 15, 1946, GS III:662), 113 (Letter to Karl Löwith on August 20, 1946, GS III:669).

<sup>12</sup> Leo Strauss, "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon," *Social Research* 6, no. 4 (1939): 502–36; Brague, "Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca," 238.

<sup>13</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952); Leo Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion and Related Writings*, trans. Svetozar Minkov and Gabriel Bartlett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

2. the theory of prophecy in Jewish and Islamic philosophy of the Middle Ages the subject of my future studies .... After finishing my book on Spinoza, I was charged by the Akademie [für die Wissenschaft des Judentums] to analyze Gersonides' *Wars of the Lord*. I started with an analysis of Gersonides' teaching on prophecy. The research on his sources led me from Maimonides to Islamic philosophers, of whom I studied several in Arabic manuscripts – and made me realize that the connection between medieval Jewish and Islamic teaching on prophecy and Plato's *Statesman* and *Laws* had not yet been thoroughly evaluated.<sup>14</sup>

In this remarkable passage, apart from the double research program, what is particularly significant is the last remark about “the connection between medieval Jewish and Islamic teaching on prophecy and Plato's *Statesman* and *Laws*,” because it points to what seems to have been the key moment in Strauss's engagement with Islamic political philosophy, as well as his whole intellectual project: Strauss's encounter, in 1929 or 1930, with a passage in Avicenna's treatise *On the Divisions of the Rational Sciences* to the effect that the treatment of prophecy and divine law is contained in Plato's *Laws*.<sup>15</sup> This statement of Avicenna was first mentioned in the essay entitled “Maimonides's Doctrine of Prophecy and Its Sources” which was originally written in 1931 and was later included in the 1935 *Philosophy and Law*.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly for understanding Strauss's particular interest in this passage and his knowledge of Arabic, he claims that he has also checked the Arabic original of Avicenna's treatise.<sup>17</sup> It therefore seems that it was Avicenna primarily who among the Muslim philosophers first caught Strauss's attention.<sup>18</sup> But it is also significant that after mentioning this statement of Avicenna, and interpreting it as a hint toward a unique way of looking at the phenomenon of

<sup>14</sup> Harvey, “Leo Strauss' Early Interest in the Islamic *Falāsifa*,” 222 (Letter to Cecil Adler on November 30, 1933); Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 59–60; Leo Strauss, “A Giving of Accounts,” in *Leo Strauss, Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 462–63; Shell, *The Strauss-Krüger Correspondence*, 18–19 (Letter to Gerhard Krüger on June 26, 1930, GS III:382–83).

<sup>15</sup> Heinrich Meier, “How Strauss Became Strauss,” in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, eds. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 17–18; Harvey, “Leo Strauss' Early Interest in the Islamic *Falāsifa*,” 221. I will discuss Avicenna's statement in more detail below (pp. 33–35, 163–64).

<sup>16</sup> Leo Strauss, “Maimunis Lehre von der Prophetie und ihre Quellen,” *Le Monde Oriental* 28 (1934): 99–139; Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law. Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 122 (GS II:112). The former was actually published in 1935.

<sup>17</sup> Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 152n57 (GS II:112n57); Harvey, “Leo Strauss' Early Interest in the Islamic *Falāsifa*,” 221n7.

<sup>18</sup> Harvey, “Leo Strauss' Early Interest in the Islamic *Falāsifa*,” 220.

prophecy, Strauss traces the idea not to Avicenna himself, but rather to Alfarabi, and explicitly mentions Alfarabi's summary of Plato's *Laws* as the key writing for establishing this fact.<sup>19</sup> In any event, we seem to have a very precise piece of evidence on Strauss's first contact with Islamic political philosophy.

(3) *The Theologico-Political Problem*. Avicenna's statement, and Strauss's concern with it, opens the way for introducing another pillar of Strauss's thought: the theologico-political problem. This aspect of Strauss's thought, which one can describe as the problem or question which in a way envelopes all other parts of Strauss's intellectual biography, has many different aspects with different degrees of complexities; it will therefore be discussed in different contexts in this book and each time, by considering it through the lens of different texts under discussion, it will be seen in a different light. Here I shall only discuss this theme by pointing to the break brought about by Strauss's turn toward Islamic political philosophy. As was shown above (pp. 4–5), in his dissertation on Jacobi and his first book on Spinoza, Strauss tends to study the question of the relationship between Reason and Revelation through epistemological-philosophical lenses. Avicenna's statement, however, led Strauss to a very different view of this relationship, which can be described precisely as theologico-political, that is, looking at religion through a *political* lens: "the science that deals thematically with prophecy is *politics*" because "the aim of prophecy is political."<sup>20</sup> This view approaches the relationship between Reason and Revelation as akin to the relationship between "Philosophy and Law," the title of Strauss's important book in this period. What "Law" is here meant is of course torah in Judaism and sharī'a in Islam, but this does not help us understand what Strauss found particularly worthy of attention in them. The significance of law in Strauss's work can be understood by a look at a rather obscure dialogue of Plato, entitled *Minos*, the dialogue which Strauss describes as the introduction to Plato's *Laws*.<sup>21</sup> *Minos* deals with the question "What is Law?" and there Socrates gives a perplexing answer to this question: "Law ... wishes to be the discovery of what is."<sup>22</sup> Now, it is rather clear that what law means here is not what we usually mean; therefore, Strauss interprets this statement by Socrates as "law is philosophy," or that it

<sup>19</sup> Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 125 (GS II:115).

<sup>20</sup> Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 122 (GS II:111).

<sup>21</sup> Leo Strauss, "On the *Minos*," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 65.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, *Minos* 315a.



pretends to be something akin to philosophy.<sup>23</sup> This view of the law is explained in *Philosophy and Law* as follows:

[The] Islamic and Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages are ... guided ... by the *primary, ancient* idea of *law* as a unified, total regimen of human life ... they are pupils of *Plato*.<sup>24</sup>

To put it differently, through Avicenna's statement, Strauss has found a way to recover the classical understanding of the law as a theologico-political whole, which is *the* alternative to philosophy. This law has a claim to being the complete knowledge of the whole, the knowledge also desired by philosophers, and by making a claim to this knowledge, the law intends to organize human life as a whole on the basis of that knowledge. It is political in the most fundamental sense of the term, as the "total regimen of life." It is also significant that in this statement of Strauss, one sees the justification of Strauss's return to the ancients and the crucial importance of Plato for understanding theologico-political problem.<sup>25</sup>

After the publication of *Philosophy and Law* in 1935, Strauss's study on Thomas Hobbes appeared in 1936,<sup>26</sup> but it was only more than ten years later that he published another book, a substantial study on Xenophon in 1948.<sup>27</sup> In the period from 1935 to 1945 – when he published his major study on an exclusively Islamic subject, "Fârâbî's *Plato*"<sup>28</sup> – apart from occasional book reviews, Strauss published eight studies of different lengths in journals and collective volumes: Three of these texts discuss mainly medieval Jewish thought,<sup>29</sup> one of them is

<sup>23</sup> Leo Strauss, *1959 Course on Plato's Laws Offered at the University of Chicago*, ed. Lorraine Smith Pangle (Chicago: Leo Strauss Center, 2016), 30 (Session 2, January 8, 1959).

<sup>24</sup> Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 73 (GS II:61).

<sup>25</sup> See also Leo Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," in *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 277 (GS II:126).

<sup>26</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936); Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 1952, (GS III:3–193).

<sup>27</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence. Corrected and Expanded Edition*, eds. Victor Gourevitch and Michael Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Strauss, "Fârâbî's Plato."

<sup>29</sup> Leo Strauss, "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching," in *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures*, eds. John Brande Trend and Herbert Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), 95–129; Leo Strauss, "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching," in *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 579–615.

dedicated prominently to Maimonides as well as to Alfarabi,<sup>30</sup> a short article is mainly on Alfarabi,<sup>31</sup> one other discusses the question of esotericism in general,<sup>32</sup> and two studies are dedicated to classical Greek political philosophy.<sup>33</sup> Significantly, it is only in one of these publications, “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon,” in which there is no trace of Islamic political thought. That Islamic political thought is foremost in Strauss’s mind can be seen also in what he says as a justification for putting aside his project on Hobbes’s critique of religion which, judging from the surviving material, was in its advanced stages.<sup>34</sup> Strauss writes that he has “placed Hobbes on the back burner for now, in order to first gain clarity about the history of Platonism in the Islamic and Jewish middle ages.” He then calls Alfarabi an “astounding” figure and describes him as a key figure for opening a new perspective on Platonism in general and for understanding Plato himself.<sup>35</sup>

(4) *Esotericism*. Contemporaneous with Strauss’s deeper engagement with Islamic political thought as a way toward classical Greek philosophy, we can also observe a further fundamental change in his thought brought about by his discovery of esotericism, the fourth pillar and one

(GS II:195–233); Leo Strauss, “The Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed,” in *Essays on Maimonides*, ed. S. W. Baron (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 37–91; Leo Strauss, “Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), 38–95; Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the Kuzari,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 13 (1943): 47–96; Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the Kuzari,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), 95–142.

<sup>30</sup> Leo Strauss, “Quelques remarques sur la science politique de Maïmonide et de Fârâbî,” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 100 (1936): 1–37; Strauss, “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” 275–314 (GS II:125–67).

<sup>31</sup> Leo Strauss, “Eine vermiste Schrift Farâbîs,” *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 80, no. 1 (1936): 90–106; Leo Strauss, “A Lost Writing of Farâbî’s (1936),” in *Reorientation. Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, trans. Martin D. Yaffe and Gabriel Bartlett (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 255–65 (GS II:167–79).

<sup>32</sup> Leo Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” *Social Research* 8, no. 4 (1941): 488–504; Leo Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), 22–38.

<sup>33</sup> Strauss, “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon”; Leo Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy,” *Social Research* 12, no. 1 (1945): 98–117; Leo Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy,” in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959), 78–95.

<sup>34</sup> These were published posthumously. See Strauss, *Hobbes’s Critique of Religion and Related Writings*, (GS III:263–74).

<sup>35</sup> Shell, *The Strauss-Krüger Correspondence*, 78–79 (Letter to Gerhard Krüger on December 25, 1935, GS III:450); Strauss, *Hobbes’s Critique of Religion and Related Writings*, 14.

of the most fundamental aspects of his thought. In view of Strauss's growing interest in Islamic thought in this period, it is not surprising to see that the discovery of esotericism has a direct relation with his studies on Islamic political thought. But let us first say a few words about Strauss's understanding of esotericism.

In the first essay of his famous book on esotericism, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss begins his discussion by reminding us of one of the most fundamental principles of a modern liberal regime, namely: freedom of public discussion.<sup>36</sup> With the totalitarian regimes implicitly in mind, Strauss remarks that this freedom is under attack in recent times and is being "suppressed." People are under "compulsion" to coordinate their speech with the views held by the government. Strauss asks us to consider the effects of "that compulsion, or persecution" on the way people write about politics and society. Although state persecution of dissenting views has a long history, even the most radical forms of persecution in history have not succeeded in fully eliminating free thought and heterodoxy. In other words, there have always been people who have entertained heterodox ideas, even under the harshest forms of persecution and oppression. This uncontroversial claim of Strauss is followed by a controversial one, according to which persecution cannot prevent even the *expression* of heterodox thought. Here Strauss is not speaking about *samizdat* or other clandestine forms of writings in oppressive regimes. What Strauss is suggesting is that in oppressive and illiberal societies where heterodox thinkers are persecuted, writers have always found ways to communicate their heterodox ideas in writing without incurring the danger of persecution, that is, not in clandestine writings, but those writings which are in principle available to the general public. They succeeded in doing this, Strauss claims, by "writing between the lines"; by developing "a peculiar technique of writing," a "peculiar type of literature" in which the heterodox truth is presented exclusively "between the lines."<sup>37</sup> These writings contain two different messages: one exoteric, which is available to all readers, and one esoteric, which is concealed from all but those who know how to read "between the lines," those who know about the esoteric style and techniques of reading used in the texts. Strauss believes that esoteric authors did not simply conceal their views in their writings by lying, but rather that they hid their genuine, heterodox teaching from a certain group of readers while simultaneously

<sup>36</sup> Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), 22–24.

<sup>37</sup> Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 1952, 22–25.

making them available to a select few. In other words, Strauss claims that both exoteric and esoteric teachings exist *simultaneously* in their published writings, and that there are specific techniques to decipher these writings. Strauss believes in the existence of *esoteric techniques* which are used by some writers; techniques which, if they are familiar to the reader, can help him decipher these esoteric writings. These techniques are, according to Strauss, employed by different authors throughout the ages to hide the esoteric teaching of their writings from the general reader and to reveal it only to those who know these techniques. Such readers are the real addressees of the author's esoteric teaching. Strauss mentions many different esoteric techniques of writing and reading in his studies including repetition,<sup>38</sup> omission,<sup>39</sup> center,<sup>40</sup> contradiction,<sup>41</sup> mentioning things once or several times,<sup>42</sup> putting words in the mouth of someone else,<sup>43</sup> numerology,<sup>44</sup> misquotation,<sup>45</sup> intentional mistakes,<sup>46</sup> allegory,<sup>47</sup> and so on – some of which will be discussed in this volume later on.

For Strauss, esoteric writers conceal their views and practice esotericism for different reasons. Many of them conceal their views simply to protect themselves from persecution.<sup>48</sup> Some other “earlier type of writers” practiced esoteric writing because of their belief in the existence of truths, dangerous truths, which should not be communicated to the many simply because they would do harm to the established social order.<sup>49</sup> This form of esotericism, Strauss claims, is found among those philosophers who belonged to a tradition of premodern Enlightenment.<sup>50</sup> Those thinkers thought that some truths must be kept secret from the many.<sup>51</sup> While

<sup>38</sup> Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the Oeconomicus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 125–26.

<sup>39</sup> Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Strauss, “Fârâbî's Plato,” 368–69.

<sup>41</sup> Strauss, “Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed,” 71.

<sup>42</sup> Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 135–36.

<sup>43</sup> Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 1952, 36.

<sup>44</sup> Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 52; Leo Strauss, “Niccolò Machiavelli,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 311.

<sup>45</sup> Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 125.

<sup>46</sup> Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 317n58.

<sup>47</sup> Leo Strauss, “The Origins of Political Science and the Problem of Socrates,” *Interpretation* 23, no. 2 (1996): 162–63; Strauss, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse*, 185–86.

<sup>48</sup> Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 1952, 33–34.

<sup>49</sup> Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 1952, 34–36.

<sup>50</sup> Leo Strauss, “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959), 221–22.

<sup>51</sup> Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 1952, 110–11.

in the first type of esotericism, the philosopher practices it to avoid persecution, in this second case he practices esotericism to protect society from doubts and radical questionings which are dangerous for the stability of a well-ordered society. There is another kind of esotericism – one that, as we shall see, is very important for the study of Strauss's own writings – which is practiced for *pedagogical* reasons. In this type of esotericism, philosophers embrace obscurity and refrain from conveying their true teachings directly, not because of fear of persecution nor to protect society from dangerous and unsettling ideas, but to educate their students and to train future philosophers. This type of esoteric writing demands the active participation of the reader: the reader cannot remain the passive audience of the written text but must work his way through the arguments on his own, face the contradictions in the text and other esoteric devices, and discover for himself the unwritten statements or the esoteric teaching of the writer.<sup>52</sup>

In what concerns the relationship between Strauss's turn toward Islamic thought and esotericism, one must say that dating Strauss's discovery of esotericism is not as simple as it might seem, and there has been a debate about the origins or the dating of Strauss's discovery of esotericism. There are two early unpublished writings on esotericism found among Strauss's papers: "Exoteric Teaching" was written sometime in December 1939; the second, which seems to be contemporaneous with the first, is a series of notes for a lecture titled "Persecution and the Art of Writing."<sup>53</sup> These two writings seem to be Strauss's first attempts to elucidate the concept of esotericism independently of any specific historical text, and thus they can be distinguished from other published esoteric studies of Strauss. Those other writings, mainly written from the early 1940s, apply Strauss's esoteric hermeneutics to the writings of thinkers like Xenophon, Maimonides, Judah Halevi, Greek political philosophers, and Alfarabi.<sup>54</sup> But who is discussed in these two early writings? In "Exoteric Teaching" Strauss avoids discussion or even naming any medieval Jewish or Islamic thinker and mainly discusses Lessing and Schleiermacher and refers to Aristotle,

<sup>52</sup> Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 1952, 36–37.

<sup>53</sup> Leo Strauss, "Exoteric Teaching," in *Reorientation. Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, eds. Hannes Kerber, Martin D. Yaffe, and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 275–87; Leo Strauss, "Lecture Notes for 'Persecution and the Art of Writing,'" in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, eds. Hannes Kerber, Martin D. Yaffe, and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 293–304.

<sup>54</sup> Strauss, "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon"; Strauss, "The Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed"; Strauss, "The Law of Reason in the Kuzari"; Strauss, "On Classical Political Philosophy," 1945; Strauss, "Fārābī's Plato."

Leibniz, Zeller, Kant, Ferguson, Rousseau, and Jacobi.<sup>55</sup> Strauss's lecture notes also only mention Western thinkers, including Cervantes, Lessing, Hobbes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, Montesquieu, Descartes, Bacon, Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, and Xenophon. Interestingly, Strauss claims that in his lecture he wishes to speak mainly of ancient and medieval esotericism, but no medieval writer is named.<sup>56</sup>

If we only had access to these early writings, we would have to conclude that Strauss discovered esotericism through the study of a few classical Greek and European writers.<sup>57</sup> However, there exists another earlier source of information about the discovery of esotericism by Strauss, namely his private correspondence. As can be deduced from his letters to Jacob Klein, Strauss's discovery of esotericism happens around January 1938, that is, nearly two years before the two abovementioned texts. Between January 1938 and November 1939, Strauss sends forty-two letters to Klein, among them sixteen letters discuss esotericism at some length.<sup>58</sup> From the letters we can deduce that Maimonides is the key writer

<sup>55</sup> Hannes Kerber, "Strauss and Schleiermacher on How to Read Plato: An Introduction to 'Exoteric Teaching,'" in *Reorientation. Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, eds. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 203–4.

<sup>56</sup> Strauss, "Lecture Notes for 'Persecution and the Art of Writing,'" 297.

<sup>57</sup> Chiara Adorisio, "Some Remarks on Leo Strauss's Philosophical-Political Reading of Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophers," in *La Philosophie Arabe à l'étude / Studying Arabic Philosophy. Sens, Limites et Défis d'une Discipline Moderne: Meaning, Limits and Challenges of a Modern Discipline*, eds. Jean-Baptiste Brenet and Olga L. Lizzini (Paris: Vrin, 2019), 78.

<sup>58</sup> Jacob Klein (1899–1978) was a Russian-American philosopher and interpreter of Plato who was one of Strauss's closest friends. A student of Heidegger, Klein taught at St. John's College in Annapolis where Strauss was resident scholar at the end of his life. Strauss-Klein correspondence is available in Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3. Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften – Briefe*, eds. Heinrich Meier and Wiebke Meier, 2nd edition (Stuttgart-Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2008), 544–87. The following letters discuss esotericism – major writers mentioned in the letters are indicated in the parenthesis: January 20, 1938 (Maimonides, Plato, Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, Proclus, Alfarabi, Averroes), February 16, 1938 (Maimonides, Averroes, Alfarabi, Voltaire, Nietzsche), July 23, 1938 (Maimonides, Nietzsche), October 15, 1938 (Plato, Herodotus), October 20, 1938 (Plato, Herodotus), November 2, 1938 (Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato), November 27, 1938 (Plato, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon), December 2, 1938 (Maimonides, Aristotle, Xenophon, Plato, Thucydides, Sophocles), December 12, 1938 (Plato, Aristophanes), February 16, 1939 (Xenophon, Aristotle, Plato, Maimonides), February 28, 1939 (Plato, Xenophon), July 25, 1939 (Xenophon, Thucydides, Herodotus, Plato), August 7, 1939 (Xenophon), August 18, 1939 (Xenophon, Plato, Cervantes), October 10, 1939 (Plato, Aristotle, Hesiod, Homer, Shakespeare, Parmenides, Thales), November 28, 1939 (Xenophon, Maimonides, Plato). For a discussion of these letters see Laurence Lampert, "Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 63–93.

who guides Strauss to his discovery of esotericism, and the application of esoteric reading to other writers happens *after* the discovery of the esoteric Maimonides.<sup>59</sup> The discovery of the esoteric Maimonides, however, has a prehistory which must be taken into account, an episode which is prior to the 1938 correspondence with Klein. But before going further back, an important point should be mentioned: in his letters of January 20 and February 16, 1938, that is, the first two of Strauss's esoteric letters, Alfarabi is mentioned alongside Maimonides and their connection is emphasized. In the first letter, Strauss writes that, for Maimonides, the crucial question was not the createdness or eternity of the world – according to Strauss, Maimonides, contrary to his explicit claims, believed in the eternity of the world. Strauss claims that for Maimonides the crucial question was whether the ideal legislator must be a prophet. Strauss writes that Maimonides, again in an esoteric way, denied this necessity, “as Farabi had before him and Averroes did in his own time.”<sup>60</sup> As we shall see, one cannot disregard this connection between Maimonides and Alfarabi. It is true that in the subsequent letters, Alfarabi and Averroes disappear, but so does Maimonides. In other words, even in Strauss's private correspondence, Alfarabi remains crucial for the study of Strauss's discovery of esotericism and is somehow connected with Maimonides.<sup>61</sup>

Considering the importance of Maimonides for Strauss's discovery of esotericism, to trace his discovery of esotericism one must follow his writings on Maimonides, which predate his correspondence with Klein. Strauss discusses Maimonides in his 1930 *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, but that study does not show any awareness of or even interest in the question of esotericism in Maimonides's works. In that book, words like *esoteric*, *esotericism*, *exoteric*, and *exotericism* are absent, and Strauss calls Maimonides “a believing Jew,” while after his discovery of esotericism he writes that “Maimonides in his beliefs was *absolutely* no Jew.”<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Lampert, “Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism,” 63. Heinrich Meier here speaks of “a whole series of philosophical supernovas.” See Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3*, xxxiii.

<sup>60</sup> Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3*, 545 (Letter to Jacob Klein on January 20, 1938).

<sup>61</sup> See also Rémi Brague's comment that Maimonides and Alfarabi are the only authors who are present in all of what Brague calls three periods of Strauss's scholarship. Rémi Brague, “Leo Strauss et Maïmonide,” in *Maimonides and Philosophy: Papers Presented at the Sixth Jerusalem Philosophical Encounter, May 1985*, eds. Shlomo Pines and Yirmiyahu Yovel (Dordrecht: Springer, 1986), 247.

<sup>62</sup> Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 163–64 (GS I:213); Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3*, 550 (Letter to Jacob Klein on February 16, 1938), 751 (Letter to Gershom Scholem on December 15, 1963).



It is therefore after his book on Spinoza and in Strauss's subsequent writings on Maimonides that one must look for the discovery of esotericism. "Maimonides' Doctrine of Prophecy and Its Sources" (originally written in 1931), which was reprinted as the third chapter of *Philosophy and Law* (1935) in a revised and abbreviated form, is properly speaking Strauss's first independent study of Maimonides's writings: in his previous studies, Strauss mainly concentrated on the points of contrast between Spinoza and Maimonides, but in this study he provides a discussion of Maimonides's understanding of prophecy by tracing it to the writings of his Muslim predecessors, mainly Alfarabi and Avicenna.<sup>63</sup> Strauss argues that Maimonides followed his Muslim teachers and that they provided him with fundamental principles of his thought. Apart from his reference to Maimonides's Muslim predecessors, another significant aspect of this essay for Strauss's intellectual biography is that this text shows the first signs of realization of the importance of esotericism. Strauss here claims that the medieval Enlightenment of Maimonides and his predecessors was essentially esoteric, while the Enlightenment of the modern philosophers was essentially exoteric.<sup>64</sup> Now, in Strauss's essay it is not entirely clear what Maimonides's esoteric teaching is. However, one has a feeling that Maimonides's thought is not entirely orthodox: for instance, Maimonides argues for the superiority of the prophet to the philosopher because the prophet has access to the supernatural knowledge which is inaccessible to the philosopher. However, this claim is followed by an important qualification: the prophet's superiority is founded on the contribution of the faculty of imagination. But as Strauss mentions, the critique of imagination is one of the major themes of Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed*.<sup>65</sup> Be that as it may, this line of inquiry does not seem to lead to a definitive and conclusive distinction between Maimonides's esoteric and exoteric teachings in Strauss's book.

Strauss's next study on Maimonides, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi" (1936), highlights more forcefully than before the importance of Alfarabi for understanding Maimonides's thought: here Strauss begins by speaking of Maimonides's "Muslim masters" and of the profound agreement between Jewish and Muslim thought. He believes that an adequate understanding of medieval Jewish philosophy is only possible by beginning from Alfarabi's Platonism, and he therefore declares his intention to show the influence of Alfarabi's philosophy

<sup>63</sup> Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 102, 113 (GS II:88, 99).

<sup>64</sup> Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 102 (GS II: 89).

<sup>65</sup> Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 106 (GS II:92).



on Maimonides.<sup>66</sup> This growing importance of Alfarabi is concomitant with the awareness of the existence of esotericism in Maimonides's writings: Strauss reminds us that Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed* is an "esoteric book" in which Maimonides has "concealed his thought." Maimonides, Strauss claims, expresses his thought only by "allusions"; one must therefore read his book with "particular attention" to discover his esoteric teaching.<sup>67</sup> Maimonides does not convey his thoughts explicitly but through signs, which suffice for one "who will understand," for an attentive and duly instructed reader. One of the main qualifications of the knowledgeable reader is that he knows Alfarabi's writings.<sup>68</sup> This essay contains a remarkable number of passages in which the importance of esotericism is mentioned: Strauss does not speak only of the esotericism of Maimonides and Alfarabi, but also of Avicenna, *Ikhwān al-safā* (Brethren of Purity), and even of Plato.<sup>69</sup> Concerning Maimonides's esoteric teaching, two points seem rather obvious: Strauss points to the "philosophic" reason for Maimonides's silence on "the origins of the Torah," including its possible "natural" origin, and also ends the essay by emphasizing Maimonides's agreement with Plato on the question of providence – the same Plato who just was said to have subscribed to "the dogma of particular providence ... only because of its political utility."<sup>70</sup>

It is not surprising that Strauss's "Some Remarks" is contemporary with one of his few writings dedicated specifically to Alfarabi, namely "A Lost Writing of Farābī's" written sometime in 1935 and published in 1936. This scholarly essay claims that some passages commonly thought to be from Alfarabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences* actually belong to the

<sup>66</sup> Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," 276–77, 279 (GS II:125–26, 129).

<sup>67</sup> Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," 290 (GS II:137).

<sup>68</sup> Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," 298–99 (GS II:144–45).

<sup>69</sup> Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," 305, 308, 308n99, 309, 309n102 (GS II: 150, 152, 152n99, 153, 153n102). Regarding the secret esoteric society of *Ikhwān al-safā*, I believe Strauss's owes the information to Paul Kraus who was working on *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, *Ismāʿīlism*, and related esoteric movements. See Paul Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān. Contribution à l'histoire des idées scientifiques dans l'Islam. Vol. 1. Le corpus des écrits jabiriens* (Cairo: Mémoires de l'Institut d'Égypte, 1943), lv, lxiv; Paul Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān. Contribution à l'histoire des idées scientifiques dans l'Islam. Vol 2. Jabir et la science grecque* (Cairo: Mémoires de l'Institut d'Égypte, 1942), 222, 316. See also Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," 279n7 (GS II:128n7).

<sup>70</sup> Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," 299, 312 (GS II: 145, 156).

first part of a trilogy of Alfarabi which includes *Attainment of Happiness*, *Philosophy of Plato*, and *Philosophy of Aristotle*. This essay is perhaps Strauss's strongest statement about the essential importance of Alfarabi for understanding Maimonides's writings. To make his claim more powerful, Strauss cites a letter from Maimonides in which he recommends Alfarabi's writings exclusively and describes them as "pure flour."<sup>71</sup> For Maimonides, the works of Alfarabi surpass any other, even those of Avicenna, who was put side by side with Alfarabi in Strauss's previous writings on Maimonides. Strauss concludes his essay with a remarkable statement about the importance of Alfarabi:

At the beginning of this epoch of the history of philosophy there stands not just any "predecessor," but the towering spirit who laid the ground for the later development and set down its limits by making his task the revival of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy as philosophy proper.<sup>72</sup>

Strauss's subsequent writings on Maimonides go in the same direction and link Alfarabi and esotericism: "The Place of the Doctrine of Providence According to Maimonides" (1937) proclaims the existence of "the secret teaching of the *Guide*" and indicates Maimonides's agreement with Alfarabi regarding the exoteric character of the doctrine of divine rewards and punishment. These exoteric doctrines are not true, but necessary for the welfare of the political order.<sup>73</sup> "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching" (1937) incarnates the fruits of Strauss's radical leap by speaking of "Maimonides and his teachers" who borrowed the idea from Plato's *Laws* that Law contains beliefs addressed to the vulgar which are not true but are useful and necessary for the well-being of the political community. Maimonides has made, Strauss claims, this distinction known in a "disguised way, partly by allusions, partly by the composition of his whole work," methods which are recognizable only to readers of his writings who are philosophers and which are inaccessible to nonphilosophers. For instance, Strauss

<sup>71</sup> Strauss, "A Lost Writing of Farâbî's (1936)," 264–65 (GS II:175–76). For the context of this article see Steven Harvey, "Leo Strauss's Developing Interest in Alfarabi and Its Reverberations in the Study of Medieval Islamic Philosophy," in *The Pilgrimage of Philosophy: A Festschrift for Charles E. Butterworth*, eds. René M. Paddags, Waseem El-Rayes, and Gregory A. McBrayer (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2019), 67–68.

<sup>72</sup> Strauss, "A Lost Writing of Farâbî's (1936)," 265 (GS II:176).

<sup>73</sup> Leo Strauss, "The Place of the Doctrine of Providence According to Maimonides," in *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green, trans. Gabriel Bartlett and Svetozar Minkov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 315n3, 322 (GS II:180n3, 186).

implicitly argues that Maimonides, contrary to his exoteric statements, actually did not believe in *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>74</sup>

Considering the points in the previous paragraph, one might consider the possibility that Strauss's discovery of esotericism happens sometime around 1936 when he was working on "Some Remarks," that is, about two years even before his 1938 esoteric correspondence with Klein. In any event, the centrality of Maimonides in his connection with Alfarabi and other *Falāsifa* in Strauss's thesis on esotericism seems undeniable.

The period beginning with the discovery of Avicenna's statement in the Berlin library culminates in the 1945 publication of "*Fārābī's Plato*." Between this major study exclusively dedicated to a Muslim philosopher who Strauss called "the starting point of philosophy" and the 1957 "How *Fārābī* Read Plato's *Laws*," which is Strauss's last major study on an Islamic figure, there is a relative silence on Islamic political philosophy in Strauss's writings.<sup>75</sup> It is true that from time to time, Alfarabi and Averroes appear on the scene, but they tend to disappear rather swiftly. How can one explain this relative silence? Did Strauss lose interest in Islamic philosophy in this period? I believe the silence can be partly explained by two points. First, there is the incomplete state of the available material for the study of Islamic political philosophy in this period.<sup>76</sup> An example is Alfarabi's summary of Plato's *Laws*. Already in 1937, explaining the importance of Alfarabi's work, Strauss claims that "only the full understanding of its true meaning would enable us to understand adequately the medieval philosophy," and advertises the publication of this work "in the near future by Dr. Paul Kraus."<sup>77</sup> This hope only materialized fifteen years later in 1952, by someone else, Francesco Gabrieli; two years later, Strauss began writing his interpretation on Alfarabi's summary.<sup>78</sup> The same thing happened with Alfarabi's *Philosophy of Plato*, which was

<sup>74</sup> Strauss, 585–86 (GS II:200–1).

<sup>75</sup> Shell, *The Strauss-Krüger Correspondence*, 79 (Letter to Gerhard Krüger on December 25, 1935, GS III:450).

<sup>76</sup> For the historical context and the state of scholarship in this period see Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3–6; Joshua Parens, "Escaping the Scholastic Paradigm: The Dispute Between Strauss and His Contemporaries About How to Approach Islamic and Jewish Medieval Philosophy," in *Encountering the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought*, eds. James A. Diamond and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 203–28; Harvey, "Leo Strauss's Developing Interest in Alfarabi," 61–62.

<sup>77</sup> Strauss, "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching," 581n4, 583 (GS II:196n4, 198).

<sup>78</sup> Alfarabi, *Compendium Legum Platonis*, ed. Francesco Gabrieli, Plato Arabus (London: Warburg Institute, 1952).

published in 1943, and Strauss's interpretation in 1945.<sup>79</sup> This point also explains the importance of Strauss's notes on Averroes's commentary on Plato's *Republic*, published and interpreted here for the first time: in several of his writings, Strauss refers to the importance of this work, and shows his interest in the modern edition of this work in 1937: "The more reliable Hebrew translation is being edited by Dr. Erwin Rosenthal."<sup>80</sup> This edition only appeared in 1956, and presumably, shortly afterward, Strauss began composing his notes on it. Even very late in his life Strauss remained interested in this writing of Averroes, and commented on his student's, Ralph Lerner, superior English translation.<sup>81</sup>

The second point which explains this period concerns Strauss's collaboration with Arabists, particularly with Paul Kraus, and later on with Muhsin Mahdi. Strauss worked closely with Kraus while in Paris (1931–32) on the edition and translation of Alfarabi's summary of Plato's *Laws* as well as reading Alfarabi's *Book of Religion*.<sup>82</sup> Shortly after Kraus's death in

<sup>79</sup> Alfarabi, *De Platonis philosophia*, eds. Richard Walzer and Franz Rosenthal, vol. 2, Plato Arabus (London: Warburg Institute, 1943).

<sup>80</sup> Leo Strauss, "Cohen and Maimonides," in *Leo Strauss on Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 221 (GS II:428); Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," 278n5, 295n59 (GS II:127n5, 142n59); Strauss, "The Place of the Doctrine of Providence According to Maimonides," 321n18 (GS II:184n18); Strauss, "Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed," 91n156; Strauss, "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching," 581n4 (GS II:196n4).

<sup>81</sup> Averroes, *Commentary on Plato's "Republic"*, trans. Erwin I. J. Rosenthal (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Oriental Publication, 1956); Averroes, *On Plato's "Republic"*, trans. Ralph Lerner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), ix. The existence of this edition seems to owe much to Strauss's initiative. See the comment by E. I. J. Rosenthal: "I must acknowledge my debt to Dr. Leo Strauss with regard to the influence of Plato on Islamic 'political' philosophy, by his first drawing my attention eight years ago to Averroes' paraphrase on Plato's 'Republic.'" Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, "Maimonides' Conception of State and Society," in *Moses Maimonides*, ed. Israel Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1935), 191n1. I owe this reference to Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 60n6.

<sup>82</sup> Muhsin Mahdi, "The Editio Princeps of Fârâbî's Compendium Legum Platonis," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 20, no. 1 (1961): 15; Joel L. Kraemer, "The Death of an Orientalist: Paul Kraus from Prague to Cairo," in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, ed. Martin Kramer (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1999), 209. In 1932–33, Strauss was registered for courses at École Pratique des Hautes Études under Louis Massignon on Nasr ibn Muzaḥim's *Waq'at Siffin* and Simon van den Bergh on philosophy and theology of Averroes. In 1933–34, he attended Massignon's course on the first religious struggles in Islam according to Abu Hanifa Dinawari, a course on Qur'ān 36, and Paul Kraus's course on the Mu'tazila. See Timothy W. Burns, "The Place of the Strauss-Kojève Debate in the Work of Leo Strauss," in *Philosophy, History, and Tyranny: Reexamining the Debate*

1944, Louis Massignon suggested to Strauss to contribute to the efforts in giving some order to Kraus's unfinished projects and unpublished manuscripts. Strauss tried to track the material related to his collaboration with Kraus on Alfarabi's summary in 1946 as he had done previously in 1936,<sup>83</sup> but it seems that he was either unsuccessful then, or the incomplete state of the project dissuaded him from working on his interpretation right away. Strauss's knowledge of Arabic language is questioned; the existing evidence as well as Strauss's own statement that "I can read Arabic philosophical texts without difficulty, what Professor Gotthold Weil can attest to," however, speaks against this conjecture.<sup>84</sup> Be that as it may, Strauss as a person seems to have been too careful a scholar to publish on Arabic writings without collaboration of an Arabist. In this regard, his acquaintance with Mahdi, who could check Strauss's translations from Arabic in his essay on Alfarabi's summary of the *Laws*, was helpful for persuading him to return to Islamic political thought. Mahdi was also instrumental, as we shall see, in Strauss's interest in the *Arabian Nights*; but Mahdi's monumental efforts in editing many of Alfarabi's writings in 1960s seem to have borne fruit rather late for Strauss to take much benefit from.<sup>85</sup>

*between Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève*, eds. Timothy W. Burns and Bryan-Paul Frost (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 18n9. For Strauss's appreciation of Massignon see Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 127 (Letter to Carl Schmitt on July 10, 1933).

<sup>83</sup> Kraemer, "The Death of an Orientalist: Paul Kraus from Prague to Cairo," 208–9; Mahdi, "The Editio Princeps of Fārābī's Compendium Legum Platonis," 15n55. For the biographical details of the relationship between Kraus and Strauss see Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 82.

<sup>84</sup> Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3*, 709 (Letter to Gershom Scholem on December 7, 1933); Harvey, "Leo Strauss' Early Interest in the Islamic *Falāsifa*," 223–26. Gotthold Weil (1882–1960) was a prominent Arabic and Hebrew scholar. There is also notebook in German and Arabic in Strauss's handwriting in Leo Strauss Papers, box 20, folder 14, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. As the Arabic terms are translated into German and the notebook itself is made in Germany, I believe the notebook must be very early. I could not date the notebook precisely nor could I identify the text at the basis of Arabic terms, but the marginal notes seem to refer to a specific Arabic edition's or perhaps a manuscript's page and line numbers. See also a letter written to Muhsin Mahdi by Strauss on September 27, 1954, transcribed in [Chapter 4](#) of this volume, where Strauss writes some words in Arabic characters.

<sup>85</sup> Strauss, "How Fārābī Read Plato's *Laws*," 1959, 134n1; Muhsin Mahdi, "Years of Chicago: Forming a Soul," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 29 (2009): 176; Charles E. Butterworth, ed., *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 383ff.

Considering these points, it would be a mistake to believe that Strauss gradually lost interest in the *Falāsifa*: the fact that he ended what he considered one of his most important works by speaking of the importance of Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī, and that he began his last book by Avicenna's statement, which he discovered forty years before, show his continuing interest in Islamic political thought up until his passing.<sup>86</sup>

#### LITERATURE ON STRAUSS'S STUDY OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

After this summary presentation of Strauss's thought and interest in the *Falāsifa*, I now turn toward the scholarly reactions to Strauss's writings on Islamic thought. One basic characteristic of the reactions to Strauss's writings on Islamic philosophy, apart from some remarkable exceptions, is that they are either entirely dismissive or mainly hostile. Regarding the dismissive reactions, two examples, already brought up by Steven Harvey, suffice: in Majid Fakhry's popular 2002 book on Alfarabi, the Muslim philosopher who Strauss and his followers tried so much to revive, there is no mention of Strauss in the whole book. If there was some way to ignore Mahdi and Butterworth's translations of Alfarabi, it seems certain that they would not appear in the book either, as is the case of their own studies on the subject.<sup>87</sup> The same treatment can be seen in the chapter dedicated to Alfarabi in *Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* by David Reisman, who does not mention any writing by Strauss or anyone influenced by his thought, even Mahdi.<sup>88</sup> Now, if one considers the amount of published scholarly writings, it is understandable that one cannot know and read every scholarly publication. But there are cases in which one simply cannot remain wholly unaware of some authors and publications: whatever one might think of Mahdi's scholarship, he

<sup>86</sup> Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 309 (Letter to Alexandre Kojève on May 29, 1962); Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York and London: Basic Books, 1966), 314; Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 1.

<sup>87</sup> Majid Fakhry, *Al-Farabi, Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism: His Life, Works and Influence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002).

<sup>88</sup> David Reisman, "Al-Fārābī and the Philosophical Curriculum," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, eds. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 52–71. See Harvey, "Leo Strauss' Early Interest in the Islamic *Falāsifa*," 234n48.

certainly was considered one of the foremost authorities in the study of Alfarabi; someone who discovered, edited, and commented on many of his writings for the first time. To ignore Mahdi's whole intellectual production requires an effort.

Those writings which do not completely ignore Strauss's contribution can be mainly divided into two groups. The first group consists of writings which are, with a single notable exception, highly critical of, and even hostile toward, Strauss's contribution to the study of Islamic philosophy. In the second group are writings which are mainly, but not entirely, sympathetic to Strauss's scholarship on Islamic political thought. Let us discuss these two groups separately:

*First Group.* In this group one should first mention Dimitri Gutas, whose very critical assessment of several approaches to the study of Islamic philosophy, including that of Strauss and his followers, is presented in an article which is considered one of the most influential in the field of Islamic philosophy written in the past two decades.<sup>89</sup> In his article, Gutas tries to deal with the relative lack of interest in Islamic philosophy among "historians of philosophy in general and ... scholars of Arabic and Islamic studies in particular."<sup>90</sup> Gutas finds the main source of this neglect to be the scholars of Islamic philosophy themselves: "historians of Arabic philosophy, have failed to present the subject to our colleagues." They have failed to do so because they have followed three mistaken and pernicious approaches in their studies, namely "orientalist," "mystical/illuminationist," and "political" approaches. Next, Gutas begins discussing what is wrong in each of these approaches, one after another, although it seems that the first approach, "orientalist," lacks prominent representatives in the scholarship of the past hundred years and Gutas confesses that it "has weakened considerably in recent decades." It appears that this approach is only mentioned first by Gutas so that its "orientalist" ideas and prejudices can be subsequently attributed to the representatives of the two other approaches as contemporary "reincarnations" of orientalism.<sup>91</sup> There are ideas in Gutas's critique of the orientalist approach with which one cannot reasonably disagree; in fact, many of them are borrowed by Gutas from Mahdi's critique of

<sup>89</sup> Dimitri Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay on the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 1 (2002): 5–25.

<sup>90</sup> Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," 5.

<sup>91</sup> Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," 8.



orientalism.<sup>92</sup> But before everything else, a general observation is in order: many of the ideas which Gutas ascribes to Strauss seem to be the result of unfamiliarity with Strauss's writings. His article does not refer to any writing by Strauss, and in view of many misrepresentations of Strauss's thought, it does not seem that Gutas has actually read any of them, at least not carefully enough. I do not wish to go point by point mentioning Gutas's misrepresentations, partly because this has been already done by others, and partly because the following study is addressed to readers like him who might want to acquire some familiarity with Strauss's writings on Islamic philosophy so as to have a better understanding of his point of view.<sup>93</sup> I therefore just limit my assessment to five critical points about Gutas's article:

(1) Gutas claims that Strauss follows the orientalist conception of Islamic philosophy as being "invariably" about the conflict between religion and philosophy; that, according to Strauss and his followers, "all of Arabic philosophy" is about this problem.<sup>94</sup> Strauss certainly found the conflict of religion and philosophy to be a very important subject for his own intellectual pursuits, and focused part of his studies on it. But such a general judgment attributed to Strauss by Gutas about many centuries of the intellectual production of hundreds, if not thousands, of thinkers in any period of any civilization would be simply absurd. And of course Strauss never claimed such a thing about Islamic philosophy, and Gutas does not adduce any evidence that he did.<sup>95</sup> Gutas has to speak in such categorical terms ("invariable," "all of") because if he had said the same thing in qualified terms his critique would become moot.<sup>96</sup> This can be

<sup>92</sup> Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," 8n6; Muhsin Mahdi, "Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 (1990): 73–98.

<sup>93</sup> Harvey, "Leo Strauss' Early Interest in the Islamic Falāsifa"; David Wirmer, "Arabic Philosophy and the Art of Reading: I. Political Philosophy," in *La Philosophie Arabe à l'étude / Studying Arabic Philosophy. Sens, Limites et Défis d'une Discipline Moderne: Meaning, Limits and Challenges of a Modern Discipline*, eds. Jean-Baptiste Brenet and Olga L. Lizzini (Paris: Vrin, 2019), 179–250. A curious case is a passage from Oliver Leaman which Gutas quotes but gives us the impression that it is from Strauss (see footnote 36: "Cited from").

<sup>94</sup> Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," 20.

<sup>95</sup> This seems, surprisingly, to be a rather common misunderstanding about Strauss. See also Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 210; James E. Montgomery, "Leo Strauss and the Alethiometer," in *Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Anna Akasoy and Guido Giglioni (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 303.

<sup>96</sup> Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," 19.



seen in his claim that the issue of the relationship between religion and philosophy for Islamic philosophers was “a very minor subject of concern, and only at certain times and in certain places.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, even he himself confesses that this subject has been of some importance for certain Islamic thinkers, although he tries to devalue its place. Gutas would have seen the mistaken character of his devaluation if he had paid enough attention to the reason why even one other opponent of Strauss's approach, Oliver Leaman, who is referred to and criticized in Gutas's article, might have been forced to give a prominent place to this issue in his introductory work on Islamic philosophy: that two of the towering figures of Islamic philosophy, al-Ghazali and Averroes, cared so much about this question as to write two major controversial treatises on this question, shows its undeniable importance.<sup>98</sup> Again, this does not mean that this subject was the *only* concern of Muslim philosophers throughout history. It would be ridiculous if anyone claimed that it was. If Strauss found this point particularly important, it was for his own intellectual preoccupations. Like any other scholar, Strauss cared for some subjects and focused on them, while he did not have the same interest in other subjects and therefore ignored them. To focus on this subject, contrary to what Gutas claims, is not a mark of orientalism or “anti-Islamic” prejudices, just as Strauss's interest in the same problem among Jewish and European thinkers is not proof of his “anti-Semitic” or anti-Christian prejudices.<sup>99</sup> This can be seen also in a related objection to Strauss made by Leaman: he claims that the Straussian esoteric reading of the Muslim philosophers, which leads to the idea that these philosophers were concerned with the conflict of Islam and philosophy, proves the Straussians' orientalist biases, because this would mean that “the philosophers in the Islamic world could not really be thought of as philosophers just like philosophers everywhere else.”<sup>100</sup> The unfounded character of this orientalist accusation is obvious: Strauss was interested in question “in Christendom and the Islamic world alike,” and therefore “it does

<sup>97</sup> Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 13.

<sup>98</sup> Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 13; Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers. A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2000); Averroes, *Tabafut Al-Tabafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, trans. Simon van den Bergh, 3rd reprint edition (London: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2008).

<sup>99</sup> Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 21.

<sup>100</sup> Oliver Leaman, “Orientalism and Islamic Philosophy,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. Oliver Leaman and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (London: Routledge, 2001), 1146.

not seem useful to characterize an attitude as Orientalist if it is equally applicable to the Occident.”<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, contrary to what Gutas claims, Strauss does not subscribe to “the biased orientalist attitude that philosophy could not thrive in ‘Islam’ because of the intrinsically anti-rationalist nature of the latter.”<sup>102</sup> The charge is quite unbelievable: if Strauss truly believed that philosophy cannot “thrive in ‘Islam’” there would not have been a “Straussian” approach to the study of Islamic philosophy! This leads us to another general point: calling everything one finds wrong in some scholar’s approach “orientalist” creates a strange confusion. Orientalism is usually understood as a term describing the prejudices of some scholars of non-Western, mainly Arabic thought and society; these scholars have described Arabic culture and society as inferior to their Western counterparts. Calling someone like Henry Corbin, who was so enamored with Islamic thought and Islamic philosophy “orientalist,” does not make much sense. Calling Strauss an “orientalist,” while he has been even considered thoroughly a student and follower of Alfarabi and Muslim philosophers, makes even less sense. Strauss was so taken with Alfarabi that one can reasonably claim that he went well beyond the existing evidence, exaggerating Alfarabi’s philosophical importance.<sup>103</sup> In fact, attributing, repeatedly, orientalist ideas and prejudices to Strauss, along with similar curious statements such as that Strauss “did not know Arabic philosophy” in Gutas’s article feels like something other than healthy scholarly disagreement, and they should be safely disregarded as serious intellectual objections.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Muhammad Ali Khalidi, “Orientalisms in the Interpretation of Islamic Philosophy,” *Radical Philosophy* 135 (2006): 27.

<sup>102</sup> Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 21.

<sup>103</sup> Brague, “Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca”; Shell, *The Strauss-Krüger Correspondence*, 78–79 (Letter to Gerhard Krüger on December 25, 1935, GS III:450).

<sup>104</sup> Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 20. See the similar curiously hostile attitude toward Joshua Parens, Muhsin Mahdi, David Wirmer, Christian Jambet, and Charles Butterworth in Dimitri Gutas, “Fārābī’s Knowledge of Plato’s ‘Laws,’” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 4, no. 3 (1998): 405–11; Dimitri Gutas, “Review of Muhsin Mahdi, Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35, no. 1 (2003): 145–47; Dimitri Gutas, “On the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy: Postscript 2017,” in *La Philosophie Arabe à l’étude / Studying Arabic Philosophy. Sens, Limites et Défis d’une Discipline Moderne: Meaning, Limits and Challenges of a Modern Discipline*, eds. Jean-Baptiste Brenet and Olga L. Lizzini (Paris: Vrin, 2019), 37–45; Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna’s Philosophical Works* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 143n45; Dimitri Gutas, “On Translating Averroes’ Commentaries,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110, no. 1 (1990): 92–101.

(2) Gutas claims that according to Strauss “all Arabic philosophy until Averroes is seen as having a political framework,” the view which Gutas argues is based on “very flimsy evidence.”<sup>105</sup> Again this idea, attributed to Strauss, is not exact; Strauss does not claim that “all Arabic philosophy” has a political framework, be it before or after Averroes. He is more concerned about how Alfarabi presents philosophy in a political framework and how his conception of prophecy as a political phenomenon is transmitted to Avicenna and Maimonides. On this subject, I can only refer to the discussion of the statement by Avicenna in this introduction and in the following chapters.

(3) Gutas is very critical of Strauss's thesis on esotericism, but like some other points in Gutas's paper, it is not very clear what Gutas is disagreeing with. That esotericism was an important phenomenon and has very deep and documented intellectual sources in Islamic philosophy is even conceded by Gutas.<sup>106</sup> What seems to be problematic for Gutas is that Strauss has applied his valid and well documented observations about the existence of esotericism to, again, “all Arabic philosophy.” As in the previous cases, Strauss does no such thing. He certainly does not apply esotericism to every author, but to some specific authors like Alfarabi and Maimonides, who both discuss this issue. In other words, contrary to Gutas's claim, Strauss never speaks in such general terms as that “all” writers were esoteric writers, but rather concentrates on specific texts: for instance, Alfarabi's preface to his summary of Plato's *Laws* contains such esoteric ideas, and it is therefore legitimate to be concerned with the question of esotericism in his writings. Furthermore, if Gutas was familiar with Strauss's commentary on Alfarabi's summary of Plato's *Laws*, as well as his other writings on this question, he would have known that Strauss does not claim that “philosophers never say explicitly what they mean out of fear of persecution.” Strauss

<sup>105</sup> Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 22–23.

<sup>106</sup> Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 19–20. See also Wirmer, “Arabic Philosophy and the Art of Reading,” 191–92. That esotericism is a common feature of Islamic philosophy is often admitted. See for instance Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*, 220, 222. Leaman is also critical of Strauss's approach but his critique is rather subtle: he seems to have a different understanding of Alfarabi's esoteric techniques and doctrines. As a whole, one can say that his view of Strauss's works is much more nuanced and constructive than Gutas's. See Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*, 222–23. In the meantime, the minor aspect of Leaman's critique in his earlier writing should be distinguished from his later very critical article in which he also uses the term “orientalism” for describing Strauss's ideas. See Leaman, “Orientalism and Islamic Philosophy.”

actually claims the reverse: by relying on Alfarabi's statements at the beginning of his summary, Strauss claims that philosophers sometimes very openly say what they mean.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, persecution is neither the only reason for practicing esotericism, nor is it the most important one for Strauss. Strauss also cares much about pedagogical esotericism, as well as esotericism practiced for the sake of the protection of society, the types of esotericism to which Gutas does not refer at all. I will not speak more in detail about the question of esotericism, first because the *historical* question of esotericism, as we shall see, is not directly related to the subject of this volume. More importantly, this question has been discussed in an exhaustive fashion in a remarkable volume by Arthur M. Melzer, who has provided a detailed discussion of esotericism and created an online appendix which includes hundreds of statements from different authors in all periods of history referring to esotericism. Melzer's most important contribution consists of showing how widespread are the statements about esotericism in the writings of different figures throughout history. I believe he has managed to provide sufficient evidence to prove that esotericism has been an undeniable historical fact, and that throughout the centuries, different writers believed in the existence of esoteric doctrines in a large variety of traditions: mystical, philosophical, political, theological, kabalistic, gnostic, and the like. Melzer's book also contains an interesting section on some common esoteric techniques, as well as historical evidence for their existence, the techniques which scholars have always found objectionable in Strauss's writings.<sup>108</sup>

(4) Gutas's paper presents itself as a diagnostic of the study of Islamic philosophy, and tries to suggest a way to make the discipline more attractive to the scholars of other fields. His solution, however, does not seem to be to the purpose. Gutas seems to be concerned that the scholars of other fields who are "philosophically minded," reading the writings of Corbin, Strauss, and their followers, might find Islamic philosophy "philosophically insignificant."<sup>109</sup> Gutas seems to believe that his own approach would not give that impression, and would actually establish the image of Muslim thinkers as serious philosophers in their own right.

<sup>107</sup> Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," 20; Strauss, "How Fārābī Read Plato's Laws," 1959, 136–37.

<sup>108</sup> Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 299–322. For the online appendix see <http://press.uchicago.edu/sites/melzer/index.html>

<sup>109</sup> Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," 10, 12, 18.

The facts, however, do not correspond to Gutas's claims. If one thing distinguishes Strauss's approach from all the other alternatives, including Gutas's own, it is the seriousness with which the writings of the *Falāsifa* are treated. They are read in an intensive fashion which has no comparable example in the writings of other scholars, who are obsessed exclusively with antiquarian details like the availability of original Greek works to Muslim philosophers. One fundamental principle of Strauss's approach, as it can also be seen in his notes on Averroes, published and interpreted in this volume, is that the reader of medieval philosophy should not "look *down*" on the author under discussion and must begin with the healthy point of departure that "the philosopher studied by the historian of philosophy is a man by far superior to his historian in intelligence, imagination, subtlety."<sup>110</sup> Such a perspective would produce philosophically far superior results than the approach advocated by other historians of Islamic philosophy, who seem always prejudiced against the access of Islamic philosophers to original works, and constantly tend to underestimate the philosophic competence of the *Falāsifa*, by imagining intermediary sources and presupposing misunderstanding of texts and Greek ideas. In the case of Gutas himself, this can be seen in his own article, where he accuses Straussians of conducting their research "as if the Arabic philosophers had recourse to the same Greek texts of Aristotle and Plato as ours," in total disregard of what Gutas describes as "historical and philological factors which conditioned the Arabic philosophers' understanding of the Greek philosophical tradition" such as "translators' misunderstandings, scribal errors, extrapolations, exegetical additions and elaborations that accumulated over the twelve centuries and more that separate classical Greek philosophy and the beginning of Arabic, and the semantic and connotative range of Arabic terms and expressions that were current at the time of each Arabic philosopher."<sup>111</sup> The same perspective, as we shall see when we get to the secondary literature on Alfarabi's summary of Plato's *Laws*, is found in Gutas's rather severe review of Joshua Parens's book, and then in an essay, where Gutas claims that Alfarabi's summary is not based on Plato's *Laws*, but rather on a summary of it, perhaps the lost Arabic translation of Galen's *Synopsis*

<sup>110</sup> Strauss, "How to Study Medieval Philosophy," 322. For a good example of this approach, which is rejected out of hand by Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," footnote 41 see also Charles E. Butterworth, "Translation and Philosophy: The Case of Averroes' Commentaries," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 1 (1994): 19–35.

<sup>111</sup> Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," 21–22.

of Plato's *Laws*.<sup>112</sup> As we shall see, Gutas's hypothesis goes even against Alfarabi's own claim that he has read Plato's *Laws*. Moreover, Gutas's hypothesis means that Alfarabi was such an incompetent and unknowledgeable thinker that he could not distinguish between Plato's dialogue and a summary of it. How can one consider this perspective an evidence for the philosophic worth of Alfarabi's writings? In a similar fashion, in another hostile review, Gutas claims that any study of Averroes's commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics* must always "take into account the decisive influence which the garbled Arabic translation of the *Poetics* and earlier Arabic commentaries had on Averroes' understanding of the text," which would again decrease the philosophic value of Averroes's commentaries.<sup>113</sup> Such claims do not seem like a remarkable vote of confidence for Islamic philosophers' high intellectual status. This point was also made in clear fashion by Mahdi in the article to which Gutas refers:

One of the strangest criticisms that continues to be made by some of the representatives of the older, historical and philological tradition of Islamic studies in the West has to do with the validity of attempts to think or rethink the thoughts of a philosopher such as Alfarabi, Avicenna, or Averroes. This means that one can treat their thought historically, biographically, sociologically, and so forth – that is good scholarship. But to think philosophically when dealing with the works of these philosophers, that is said not to be scientific. This view makes no sense, of course. Without thinking theologically, one cannot understand fully the thought of a theologian; without thinking aesthetically, one cannot understand fully the work of a poet or a literary critic, and generally any important work of art; similarly, one can do all the historical or philological or sociological research he wishes, without being able to get to the core of a philosophic work.<sup>114</sup>

If one was in the habit of accusing others of orientalism, reducing the study of Islamic philosophy only to editing manuscripts, pointing to the real or imaginary poor understanding of Greek originals on the part of Muslim philosophers, and the enterprise of explaining everything by establishing lines of influence, the enterprise which reduces Islamic philosophy to a mere appendix of Greek thought, is more deserving of the accusation of orientalism than Strauss's approach, which treats Islamic philosophers as thinkers of the same rank as Plato and Aristotle.<sup>115</sup> But I believe we should not

<sup>112</sup> Gutas, "Fārābī's Knowledge of Plato's 'Laws'"; Dimitri Gutas, "Galen's Synopsis of Plato's *Laws* and Fārābī's *Talḥīṣ*," in *The Ancient Tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism: Studies on the Transmission of Greek Philosophy and Sciences*, eds. Remke Kruk and Gerhard Endress (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1997), 101–19.

<sup>113</sup> Gutas, "On Translating Averroes' Commentaries," 92.

<sup>114</sup> Mahdi, "Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy," 93.

<sup>115</sup> Khalidi, "Orientalisms in the Interpretation of Islamic Philosophy," 28.

commit the same mistakes, and the temptation of dealing with differences of approach by recourse to such charged terms should be resisted.

(5) I also find Gutas's whole project of eliminating competing approaches in favor of a unitary, mainly historical and philological approach, advocated by Gutas himself, unreasonable. One does not have to be a Straussian, Corbinian (or Gutasian for that matter), to find their approaches useful, in the same way that one can appreciate Karl Marx or Aristotle's writings without being a Marxist or an Aristotelian. In the same vein, the following study is not an apology for Strauss or an effort to convert people to "Straussianism" (whatever that may be). It would have achieved its goal if it only persuades scholars of any approach that Strauss's writings on Islamic philosophy have something of value in them too, from which they can benefit for their own intellectual interests, which might be completely different from Strauss's. In the same fashion, I do not deny that other approaches, including those of Corbin or Gutas, are also valuable, and one can learn something of importance from them without agreeing completely with everything they say. They can at the very least play the role of a dialectical opponent. I am not completely convinced, for instance, that emphasis on the religious character of Islamic philosophy, disregarding the distinction between the rational and supra-rational, and including mystics and Sufis alongside Alfarabi and Averroes in the tradition of Islamic philosophy, characteristic of Corbin's writings and those of other scholars, is correct.<sup>116</sup> I also find the philologic-historical approach *detached* from a philosophic perspective on the writings of Muslim philosophers harmful for the discipline. But I cannot but appreciate the alternative scholarly approaches, and would not wish their practitioners all convert to one single approach; this would considerably impoverish the intellectual debate and reduce the healthy diversity in the field of Islamic philosophy.

Moving from Gutas's critique of Strauss, among the critical reactions to Strauss's interest in the *Falāsifa*, I believe Georges Tamer's is a noteworthy one.<sup>117</sup> His study is a thorough and intelligent reading of Strauss's writings and reflects, contrary to other critiques of Strauss, a good knowledge of and engagement with the primary sources. Tamer's approach, as a whole, is scholarly and constructive. When he makes critical remarks, he tries to create a constructive dialogue by referring

<sup>116</sup> See my brief comments in Rasoul Namazi, "Illuminationist Texts and Textual Studies: Essays in Memory of Hossein Ziai," *Iranian Studies* 53, nos 5–6 (April 14, 2020): 1–4, and Butterworth's chapter mentioned in the review.

<sup>117</sup> Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*.



to relevant studies on Islamic philosophy. His specific points are also worthy of attention, to which I refer in this book whenever relevant to the discussion. I do not agree with his general perspective and conclusions, but as it is not still available to English-speaking readers, I will try to give a general description of his study.<sup>118</sup> This short summary does not of course cover all aspects of Tamer's work, but only emphasizes those points which I find particularly significant for the subject of this book.

Tamer finds Strauss's interest in Islamic philosophy already present in his first book on Spinoza, where the Averroistic critique of religion is discussed.<sup>119</sup> This would mean a much earlier turn toward the *Falāsifa*, in 1925–28, when Strauss was writing *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*.<sup>120</sup> Tamer finds a particularly significant idea in this early engagement, the idea which he believes to be a constant element of Strauss's thought until the end, and which englobes his whole approach to Islamic philosophy: Strauss's Averroistic interest in the political function of religion as an instrument for education of the multitude, which is dominated by irrationality and impervious to reason. In this view, and in contradistinction to what Strauss considers to be the Epicurean critique of religion, religion is not seen as a natural, spontaneous, and irrational product of the human psyche, but rather a political institution founded by intelligent men as a code of law to regulate social life. Tamer believes that this view of religion is also Strauss's own, which he borrowed from Averroes: Tamer, who deems Strauss an atheist like his models (Alfarabi, Avicenna, Averroes, etc.), nonetheless notes that Strauss believed that religion should not be refuted or destroyed, but preserved and used politically. In Tamer's view, Strauss's critique of modernity has a direct relationship with this view of religion: in his diagnostic, Tamer claims, Strauss finds the origin of the crisis of modernity in its failure to integrate religion as an instrument of order into society by discrediting it and weakening public morality. Strauss's critique of Carl Schmitt, in Tamer's eyes, consisted precisely of

<sup>118</sup> A translation of his book is set to appear by SUNY Press in the future.

<sup>119</sup> Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 41–47; Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 47–49, 101 (GS 1:77–79, 145).

<sup>120</sup> This would also coincide with Eugene R. Sheppard's suggestion that Strauss was introduced to Islamic philosophy in the period 1924–25: Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 33. See also the comment by E. I. J. Rosenthal in 1935: "I must acknowledge my debt to Dr. Leo Strauss with regard to the influence of Plato on Islamic 'political' philosophy, by his first drawing my attention eight years ago [i.e. ca. 1927] to Averroes' paraphrase on Plato's 'Republic.'" Rosenthal, "Maimonides' Conception of State and Society," 191n1.



remaining in the horizon of liberal secularism and not turning to religion as an effective political phenomenon.<sup>121</sup> It is in this perspective that Tamer tries to understand Strauss's esotericism: the philosopher is advised to say the truth about religion and its unfounded claims *only* esoterically, and exoterically he should employ "noble lies" so he does not undermine healthy myths necessary for the common good.<sup>122</sup> Like many other readers, Tamer has also difficulties with Strauss's esoteric interpretations and finds them unconvincing and far-fetched. He also raises some rather common objections against Strauss: that his interpretations of Alfarabi are based on the supposition that Alfarabi knew Plato's writings, which Tamer is skeptical about. This leads Tamer to the belief that Avicenna's statement, rather than to Plato's *Laws*, actually refers to a pseudepigraphic treatise which was in circulation during this time under the title of "Plato's Laws."<sup>123</sup>

I find two aspects of Tamer's thesis of particular importance: First, his claim about Avicenna's statement, and second, the political teaching which he ascribes to Strauss. I am not entirely convinced by either of these, but I find them both worthy of attention. In what concerns Tamer's objections to Strauss's interpretation of Avicenna's statement, two points are important. Here is Avicenna's statement, in Mahdi's translation, at the heart of the controversy:

Of this science, the treatment of kingship is contained in the book by Plato and that by Aristotle on the regime, and the treatment of prophecy and the Law is contained in their two books on the laws.<sup>124</sup>

Tamer mentions that this reading is based on a Gotha manuscript, while in the Constantinople version there is a variant in which rather than "their two books on laws" (*kitābāhumā al-mawḍū' fī nawāmīs*) it reads "two books on laws" (*kitābān fī nawāmīs*).<sup>125</sup> In other words, in the Constantinople version, 'two books on the laws' are *not* attributed explicitly to Plato and Aristotle.<sup>126</sup> Tamer prefers the Constantinople reading because, he claims, even in Arabic sources, there is no mention of a (pseudo-) Aristotelian book on laws. Mahdi, on the contrary, speaks

<sup>121</sup> Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 93.

<sup>122</sup> Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 327–28.

<sup>123</sup> Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 58–87.

<sup>124</sup> Avicenna, "On the Divisions of the Rational Sciences," in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, eds. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi, 1st edition (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 97.

<sup>125</sup> Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 152n57 (GS II:112n57).

<sup>126</sup> Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 64–65.

in a footnote of “the two books given in the bibliographies of Aristotle’s writings, which bear the same titles as the two works by Plato.”<sup>127</sup> Tamer thinks that Mahdi was mistaken: “Aristotle did not write such a book, and no such title can be found among the pseudo-Aristotelian Arabic translations.”<sup>128</sup> I believe Mahdi is not referring to Arabic bibliographical sources, but rather to the list of Aristotle’s writings in Diogenes Laertius who attributes “Extracts from Plato’s Laws, in three books,” and more importantly, “Four books of Laws” to Aristotle.<sup>129</sup> Tamer goes on to make another point, which is the real basis of his criticism; the question of the pseudo-Aristotelian book on the laws is not essential to his point. He reads Avicenna’s statement as effectively referring to a writing by Plato on the laws, but not the genuine version of Plato’s *Laws* which we are familiar with and to which Strauss refers. Tamer mentions that there were “three” books with the title “Plato’s Laws” existing in this period: a pseudo-Platonic treatise which dealt with superstitious practices,<sup>130</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Avicenna, “On the Divisions of the Rational Sciences,” 97n2.

<sup>128</sup> Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 65.

<sup>129</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* V.22, V.26. Regarding the attribution of a pseudepigraph on the laws to Aristotle I should also mention two supplementary points: At the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle seems to promise a discussion of *nomoi* and legislation in another writing of his (1181b12ff.). The Arabic translation of *Ethics* has survived and contains these passages: Aristotle, *The Arabic Version of the Nicomachean Ethics*, eds. Anna Akasoy, Alexander Fidora, and Douglas Morton Dunlop (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 580. On this basis alone, even without knowledge of Diogenes Laertius’s bibliographical information, Muslim thinkers might have believed that just as in the case of Plato’s *Laws*, there is also a discussion of *nawāmi*s in Aristotle’s writings, presumably in a treatise coming after the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Diogenes Laertius’s report about a book specifically on laws by Aristotle seems to correspond to Aristotle’s announcement at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. One should also consider the possibility that our knowledge of the pseudo-Aristotelian writings in Arabic might be incomplete, and that just as in the case of Diogenes Laertius, there was perhaps such a work on laws attributed to Aristotle in Arabic sources. Furthermore, it is interesting that in his *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq wa-taḥḥīr al-a’rāq*, Ibn Miskawayh quotes a passage on *nomos* (nāmūs) and *sharī’a* from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*: “The highest law [nāmūs] is from God (blessed and exalted is He!), the ruler is a second law on His behalf, and money is a third law. The law of God [nāmūs allāh] (exalted is He!), i.e., the Law [sharī’a], is the model for all the other laws.” In Ibn Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character*, trans. Constantine K. Zurayk (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1968), 103; Rémi Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 116–17. The original passage, different from Ibn Miskawayh’s quotation, is Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1134a26ff.

<sup>130</sup> Strauss knew this work: Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the Kuzari,” 123. See also Liana Saif, “The Cows and the Bees: Arabic Sources and Parallels for Pseudo-Plato’s Liber Vaccae (Kitab al-Nawamis),” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 79, no. 1 (2016): 1–47.

another, second pseudo-Platonic treatise which actually deals with religious law and prophecy, and a third book, which Tamer describes as the “translation of the work summarized by Alfarabi.”<sup>131</sup> Tamer believes that Avicenna is actually referring to the second pseudo-Platonic work rather than the genuine Plato's *Laws*. One should not, however, overlook the fact that Tamer also means that the genuine *Laws* of Plato was not accessible to Arabic readers, and that Alfarabi's summary of Plato's *Laws* is actually a summary of another writing, probably Galen's lost summary of Plato's *Laws*.<sup>132</sup>

The question of the existence of an Arabic translation of Plato's *Laws* and related issues will be dealt with in detail when we turn to Strauss's interpretation of Alfarabi's summary of Plato's *Laws* in Chapter 4 of this book. I should only mention one point about Tamer's claim on Avicenna's statement: although it is possible that Strauss was mistaken in identifying Avicenna's reference, the alternative, that Avicenna is indeed referring to the genuine writing of Plato, remains also a possibility. It is true that Plato's *Laws* is not about, in Islamic terms, prophecy and shari'a, but it is not difficult to see how Muslim thinkers could have seen an overlap between the Platonic depiction of Zeus–Minos–Dorian laws and the Islamic idea of Allah–Muhammad–shari'a. In other words, the idea of a divine lawgiver, his messenger or a bringer of divine laws, and his detailed laws regulating different aspects of political society, is easily transferable from Plato's Greek context to a Muslim context; this can clearly be seen in Ibn Miskawayh's reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>133</sup> To wit, in the absence of concrete proof which contradicts Strauss's reading of Avicenna's statement, his interpretation remains a possibility and safe from Tamer's objections. I should here emphasize that certitude about the Muslim philosophers' lack of access to Plato's *Laws* is the main reason why Tamer has difficulty with Avicenna's statement. If one questions that certitude, which I will do later on, one has to begin thinking about the reasons why Muslim philosophers might have thought that Plato's dialogue is relevant to their specific theologico-political situation. This directly leads to ideas similar to Strauss's.

I also find Tamer's general claim – that is, ascribing a *teaching* of a highly political as well as secretive character to Strauss – unconvincing.

<sup>131</sup> Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 67–68.

<sup>132</sup> Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 65, 65n22. Tamer is here following Gutas. See Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 65n22.

<sup>133</sup> On this question see also Brague, *The Law of God*, esp. 117–18. See also footnote 129 above.

A proper assessment of Tamer's claim, however, requires an independent discussion addressing many specific interpretative points in Strauss's writings, which would go beyond the main subject as well as the limitations of the current study. I will limit my comment only to what I believe is the major source of misunderstanding among Strauss's readers, which has given rise to the attribution of many contradictory and controversial political teachings to Strauss by very different scholars, including Tamer. To begin with, this specific view of religion, as an instrument of political control which responds to the conflict of theory and praxis and the insurmountable divide between the philosophers and the many, is of classical origin rather than an exclusively Averroistic doctrine. Strauss finds an example of this view in a passage from Aristotle, in which he writes of the mythical ideas about the gods which were introduced by the ancients "with a view to the persuasion of ordinary people and with a view to its use for legal purposes and for what is advantageous."<sup>134</sup> Following Saint Augustine, who traces this idea to certain Stoics, Strauss uses the term "civil theology" for describing this view of religion, but he also emphasizes that "this view is not peculiar to Aristotle" but is an idea found in other classical writers, including Plato, who also "affirms the dogma of particular providence only because of its political utility."<sup>135</sup> This civil religion was later transmitted to thinkers like the Falāsifa, Maimonides, and many philosophers of modern times including Machiavelli, Spinoza, and Rousseau. Strauss does nothing but document this tradition, as others have done.<sup>136</sup> What Tamer considers Strauss's personal view is only what Strauss claims to be a historically documented understanding of religion among many thinkers throughout history. In fact, in a recently published lecture, in which Strauss speaks of the classical philosophers' understanding of religion in its relationship with politics, when speaking in his own name Strauss begins to state his doubts about the effectiveness as well as desirability of such a false public religion in modern liberal regimes.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074b1–5 (C. D. C. Reeve translation).

<sup>135</sup> Augustine, *The City of God* IV.27; Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," 312 (GS II:156); Leo Strauss, "'Religion and the Commonwealth in the Tradition of Political Philosophy.' An Unpublished Lecture by Leo Strauss," eds. Svetozar Minkov and Rasoul Namazi, *American Political Thought* 10, no. 1 (2021): 97.

<sup>136</sup> See e.g. Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>137</sup> Strauss, "Religion and the Commonwealth," 110–11.

To go from Strauss's historical description of civil religion and explanation of its underlying ideas, such as the divide of the philosophers and the many, to Tamer's claim that these historical observations are in fact Strauss's recipe for resolving the crisis of modernity, requires a considerable leap which cannot be easily made. Tamer has in fact here encountered a problem which has a long pedigree among Strauss's readers who, rejecting the primary impression of Strauss as a historian of thought, consider him a thinker with a specific political teaching. In this regard, one should first mention a rather fundamental point in Strauss's whole corpus, even including the material surviving from his courses and lectures which are of more occasional character: compared to many other scholars of his generation, Strauss did not advance any specific political project or practical plan of action. To attribute a specific project to Strauss on the basis of existing evidence would be very difficult, if not impossible. Strauss rarely, if ever, speaks in his own name, but rather writes in the form of commentaries on the writings of other thinkers and on specific historical texts. Other readers, facing the descriptive character of Strauss's writings, the absence of writings by Strauss in the form of a straightforward "treatise" containing his views in an accessible fashion, yet still in search for Strauss's own teaching, were forced to find a positive teaching behind Strauss's scholarly and historical writings. They had recourse to the idea that the historical character of Strauss's writings is only a façade used for conveying an esoteric teaching underneath; that Strauss speaks in his commentaries through esoteric techniques. To establish such a thesis one must naturally begin applying all those controversial methods of esoteric reading to Strauss's own writings, with all the controversial issues concomitant with such an enterprise.<sup>138</sup> Tamer is aware of this tendency among some of Strauss's commentators, and he objects to this method by writing that "Leo Strauss must be taken seriously [*Ernst*], i.e., at his word and the unfortunate guesswork around his esoteric, not explicit thoughts must be avoided."<sup>139</sup> Hence the difficulty in establishing Tamer's thesis by referring to Strauss's explicit statements.

This does not mean that Tamer would have been more successful in establishing his thesis if he would have attempted an esoteric reading of Strauss's writings. In fact, to claim that Strauss has an esoteric thesis which

<sup>138</sup> See the same difficulty in Shadia Drury's treatment of Strauss: Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 117ff.

<sup>139</sup> Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 24–27, 35, but cf. 267n7.

recommends the establishment of a civil religion would be unpersuasive: for any esoteric teaching to be successful, the principal requirement is to *not present it as an esoteric teaching*. Every noble or base lie is only effective if it is *not* presented as a lie. In view of Strauss's deliberate and emphatic association of himself with historical writings on the idea of civil religion, esotericism, and noble lies, one cannot imagine that Strauss was unaware that such an association would weaken the chances of success of a project of civil religion in his time or in the future. Strauss finds an esoteric teaching according to which religion is only a salutary myth in the writings of Plato and Alfarabi; but neither of these thinkers spoke on this subject exoterically and in public. Plato did not question the divine origin of the Dorian Laws, nor did Alfarabi question basic Islamic tenets openly. The ideas that Tamer attributes to Strauss, such as the elitist view of knowledge, functionalist view of religion, and such are, on the contrary, presented in Strauss's writings in a very straightforward and nonesoteric fashion. How could Strauss have seriously believed that he can go on to present a religious teaching to the public while at same time discrediting all belief in such a religious teaching openly in his writings, which are also accessible to the same audience?<sup>140</sup>

Before moving on from Tamer's thesis, I would also like to mention two supplementary points which would help the readers of this study, as well as prevent them from looking for Strauss's specific political teachings: the first point concerns what might have led Tamer and other scholars, and might still persuade his other readers, to conclude that Strauss is not wholly impartial toward the political ideas that he ascribes to other thinkers. I believe this is mainly born out of one of Strauss's most important hermeneutical principles: that the task of a historian above all is to make the best case for the ideas advanced in the text he is commenting on. The historian should not presuppose beforehand that those ideas are wrong if they do not correspond to his own views. For the sake of historical exactitude, Strauss advises the historian that no "prejudice in favor of contemporary thought, even of modern philosophy, of modern civilization, of modern science itself" should "deter him from giving the thinkers of old the *full* benefit of the doubt."<sup>141</sup>

<sup>140</sup> On the difficulties of an esoteric reading of Strauss in more detail see Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 115–55; Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines*, 107–11. What is unsatisfactory in the Zuckerts' discussion is that they seem to deny the existence of esoteric writing in Strauss's own works, which, as we shall see, is not the case. See also Peter Minowitz, *Straussophobia: Defending Leo Strauss and Straussians against Shadia Drury and Other Accusers* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009).

<sup>141</sup> Strauss, "How to Study Medieval Philosophy," 325.

Following the same approach, Strauss always tried to adhere to what he called “*the principle of criticism*,” that in treating a thinker seriously means to “take him at his strength.” He therefore, not only avoided the straw man fallacy, but presented the best possible case for each view, even sometimes exaggerating the strengths of a position with which he ultimately disagreed.<sup>142</sup> This approach, which has much merit from a scholarly perspective, might give us the impression that Strauss actually agreed with the ideas of the authors he is discussing and presenting. But Strauss wrote commentaries and taught courses on a wide range of philosophers, theologians, and thinkers of all persuasions. It is not difficult to find passages in all of these writings and transcripts in which Strauss gives a rather sympathetic view of the ideas of the texts he is discussing: not only Xenophon, Plato, or Alfarabi, but also Judah Halevi, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, and even Max Weber find positive treatments in Strauss’s writings and courses. It is as indefensible to attribute what Strauss says about Plato or Alfarabi to Strauss himself as to do so in the case of Strauss’s claims about Halevi (an anti-philosophic thinker), Machiavelli (the founder of modern thought), Weber (the father of sociological positivism), or Heidegger (the originator of radical historicism).

The second point which must be considered is Strauss’s specific approach to the relationship between philosophy and politics. Strauss was very suspicious and critical of the role of philosophy in practical politics, and used as his model Plato, whose method he described in these terms:

Plato composed his writings in such a way as to prevent for all time their use as authoritative texts. His dialogues supply us not so much with an answer to the riddle of being as with a most articulate “imitation” of that riddle. His teaching can never become the subject of indoctrination. In the last analysis his writings cannot be used for any purpose other than for philosophizing. In particular, no social order and no party which ever existed or which ever will exist can rightfully claim Plato as its patron.<sup>143</sup>

Strauss did not, of course, write dialogues, but he employed a variety of techniques for creating a sort of dialogue in his texts, behind which he

<sup>142</sup> Leo Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections,” in *Studies on Platonic Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 168; Leo Strauss, 1963 *Spring Course on Vico Offered at the University of Chicago*, ed. Wayne Ambler (Chicago: Leo Strauss Center, 2016), 59 (Session 3, October 7, 1963); Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 16.

<sup>143</sup> Leo Strauss, “On a New Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy,” *Social Research* 13, no. 3 (1946): 351.



stands without taking a definite stance on the ideas advanced. In his writings, everything seems preliminary. It is often difficult to say who is talking in the text; an idea stated on one page is rejected in the next and it is replaced by another in the next chapter. It is therefore not surprising that there are sharp disagreements among Strauss's readers even about his views on the most prominent aspects of his thought.<sup>144</sup> It seems that just like Plato, anyone who tries to provide an exposition of Strauss's views "can easily be refuted and confounded by passages in [his writings] which contradict his exposition."<sup>145</sup> Strauss himself disappears in his commentaries; it is even an exaggeration to say that his voice is less "audible than that of the writers he discusses"; he seems entirely absent.<sup>146</sup> His writings resemble mazes which, once in a while, one believes one has escaped, codes which one believes one has eventually cracked; but in the end it is difficult to find Strauss's own personal views. Strauss followed these methods precisely to avoid the attribution of a specific political teaching to him. Strauss is often described as an anti-modern thinker, and there is certainly a very critical aspect in his treatment of modern political thought. His general view on the modern liberal regimes, especially on the American regime and its founding principles and documents is, however, a controversial issue. This issue has also been studied many times by Strauss's scholars, who have tried to discover Strauss's view of the modern liberal American regime, which seems entirely incompatible with Strauss's preference for ancient political thought; the main difficulty is that, despite his critical views, Strauss seemed to have appreciated the American regime because of its free institutions and achievements.<sup>147</sup> Such questions regarding Strauss's thought are many and certainly complex. As we shall see, the general skeptical philosophic approach which Strauss recommends in some of his writings makes it even doubtful that a straightforward answer to them is easy to provide.

*Second Group.* The writings of the scholars who have sympathetic views of Strauss's scholarship on Islamic philosophy are few but also of high quality. Some of these writings deal mainly with the biographical aspects of Strauss's interest in Islamic philosophy: as an example, we

<sup>144</sup> For an overview of some debates see Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, 311–38.

<sup>145</sup> Strauss, "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," 16.

<sup>146</sup> Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959), 265; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3*, 545 (Letter to Jacob Klein, 20 January 1938); Lampert, "Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism," 64.

<sup>147</sup> For a good summary of difficulties see Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 58–80.



can mention two articles by Steven Harvey, to which we referred previously.<sup>148</sup> Also important is another paper by Rémi Brague which emphasizes the importance of Islamic thought in Strauss's intellectual project.<sup>149</sup> A general intellectual biography of Strauss by Daniel Tanguay is another important work which emphasizes the central importance of Alfarabi in Strauss's scholarship.<sup>150</sup> A more substantial and very valuable contribution by Joshua Parens is a collection of articles on different aspects of Strauss's writings on medieval political philosophy.<sup>151</sup> Despite the importance of these contributions, from which I have greatly benefitted and to which I refer whenever suitable, the current study has a different character and deals with Strauss's contribution to the study of Islamic philosophy in a way which is different from these thought-provoking studies. This will be discussed in the next section, dealing with the aim of this volume.

#### THE AIM OF THIS STUDY

As we saw, much of the resistance to Strauss's writings in general and to his studies on Islamic philosophy in particular are born out of strong disagreement with the scholarly worth of his thesis on esotericism, as well as suspicions about Strauss's motives regarding the practice of esoteric writing and reading in his own works. On the question of esotericism as a historical phenomenon and esoteric reading as a legitimate and scientifically justifiable method of historical research, as was said before, I cannot say much in this study, and refer readers to other detailed discussions.<sup>152</sup> In what is of concern for this study, I

<sup>148</sup> Harvey, "Leo Strauss' Early Interest in the Islamic *Falāsifa*"; Harvey, "Leo Strauss's Developing Interest in Alfarabi."

<sup>149</sup> Brague, "Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca."

<sup>150</sup> Tanguay, *Leo Strauss. An Intellectual Biography*. See also Tanguay, "How Strauss Read Farabi's Summary of Plato's 'Laws.'"

<sup>151</sup> Joshua Parens, *Leo Strauss and the Recovery of Medieval Political Philosophy* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2016). See also Parens, "Escaping the Scholastic Paradigm."

<sup>152</sup> I should only add that although I find such discussions of immense importance, I do believe that Strauss's esotericism is yet to receive the philosophic treatment which it deserves and there are some fundamental aspects of Strauss's thesis which remain mostly unexplored. What I am pointing at will be discussed implicitly here in [Chapter 3](#), dedicated to interpretation of Strauss's essay titled "*Fārābī's Plato*." I postpone a more satisfactory treatment to a later study which I hope to finish in the future. In the meantime, a good treatment of this question can be found in the following: Heinrich Meier, "The History of Philosophy and the Intention of the Philosopher. Reflections on Leo Strauss," in *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 53–75.

should only mention a specific point: as was said previously, Strauss's thesis on esotericism does not concern itself exclusively with protective esotericism, which has as its objective the protection of philosopher against persecution, nor is it only about esotericism practiced for the sake of shielding society against the so-called "dangerous truths."<sup>153</sup> This is while these two types of esotericism, because of the commonsensical aspect of the first and controversial character of the second, have received the lion share of attention in the literature. I believe, however, that the third kind of esotericism, namely pedagogical esotericism, has a much more fundamental importance for Strauss. This should have been obvious for those readers in search of Strauss's esoteric political teaching, because speaking of esotericism, Strauss explains that those two types of esoteric writing which exist for the sake of the protection of the philosopher and the protection of society were composed exclusively in societies in which "an era of persecution" reigned and where "freedom of inquiry, and of publication of all results of inquiry" were "not guaranteed as a basic right."<sup>154</sup> Such societies are fundamentally different than the contemporary liberal societies in which Strauss wrote. On the basis of this observation, Strauss addressed as clearly as possible, the obvious issue: "one may very well raise the question of what use it [esotericism] could be in a truly liberal society."<sup>155</sup>

Strauss's answer to this question is based on his view of philosophy and the philosophic life: Strauss subscribed strongly to the idea of philosophic life in which philosophy is not meant as a set of doctrines or teachings but rather a way of life dedicated to the search for truth. In this view, education plays a central role, because to teach philosophy is not to transmit ideas or teachings from the teacher to the student, but rather to train the student to philosophize on his own. This mainly happens in a one-on-one conversation between the philosopher and potential candidates for pursuing the philosophic life, depicted beautifully in Socratic dialogues.<sup>156</sup> But in the absence of philosopher-teachers who, according to Strauss, come very rarely in history, it is their writings which play the role of intermediary. Pedagogic esoteric writing has the function of imitating the dialogue between philosopher and a student

<sup>153</sup> Strauss, "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," 221.

<sup>154</sup> Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 1952, 32, 36.

<sup>155</sup> Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 1952, 36.

<sup>156</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1964), 53; Brague, "Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca," 244.

of philosophy who follows the esoteric clues of the writer in the search of the esoteric teaching of the text. According to Strauss, the esoteric writers had recourse to the most complex forms of the art of writing to *intentionally* make their teaching only accessible to a select group of close, careful, determined, and untiring readers, who are their real students. It is through thinking out the problems, contradictions, half arguments, slight changes in the enumerations, repetitions, and such esoteric clues that the student is trained in the ways of philosophic thinking.<sup>157</sup>

Regardless of what one might think of Strauss's historical claims about the esoteric character of the writings of past philosophers, Strauss himself followed, as we shall see in the commentaries of this book, such a procedure in his writings. Strauss is an exceedingly careful writer who demands of us to read him with care – a demand that, if not met, would not reveal the most important messages contained in his writings. One of Strauss's most careful readers once confessed that if one reads Strauss's writings "as one reads a treatise," their contents will be "guarded by seven seals." A conventional reading of Strauss's works "provides us with a few arid generalizations that look like oases in a sandy desert."<sup>158</sup> This judgment about the difficulties of Strauss's writings is not limited to the sympathetic readers of Strauss: commenting on one of Strauss's perhaps less complex writings, James E. Montgomery confesses that, although "Strauss writes, on the whole, clear English and at first blush seems not to pose the reader any problems of verbal impenetrability," he has found it "it easier to read Derrida and Foucault, for example, than to read Strauss," that "even after repeated reading," Montgomery has found it "very difficult to understand the ideas which inform what it is that he seems to be saying."<sup>159</sup> If one reads many of Strauss's carefully-crafted writings as one reads ordinary and straightforward academic texts, they would provide one only with a few generalizations which lack the complexity of his observations and statements which are only discovered through an intensive esoteric reading of his texts. Taking into account the complexities of Strauss's art of writing requires a different way of reading and a different way of presenting his writings. What is

<sup>157</sup> Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 1952, 35–37; Strauss, *The City and Man*, 54; Arthur M. Melzer, "On the Pedagogical Motive for Esoteric Writing," *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007): 1023.

<sup>158</sup> Allan Bloom, "Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899–October 18, 1973," *Political Theory* 2, no. 4 (1974): 390.

<sup>159</sup> Montgomery, "Leo Strauss and the Alethiometer," 287–88, 298.

above all necessary is to pay attention to the complexities and subtleties of Strauss's writings and his meticulous style.

Because of the mostly negative reception of Strauss's scholarship, explaining this aspect of Strauss's writings has fallen mostly on the shoulder of scholars more sympathetic to Strauss's general intellectual project. Aware of the esoteric aspect of Strauss's writings, these scholars have produced important commentaries through reading Strauss in the meticulous way that he read others.<sup>160</sup> There is also a need for such commentaries, specifically on Strauss's writings on Islamic political thought, which this volume wishes to satisfy. The rare studies that do pay attention to Strauss's writings on Islamic thought, mentioned as the second group, while being very valuable contributions, are deficient in some respects: to begin with, these studies do not take into account several important unpublished manuscripts and only concentrate on Strauss's published writings. Apart from the light that these unpublished writings shed on Strauss's published works on Islamic thought, in these manuscripts, one finds Strauss's reflections on a variety of texts on which he never published anything. Consequently, a proper presentation, interpretation, and understanding of these writings are necessary if we are to have an adequate picture of Strauss's interest in Islamic thought. Furthermore, and more importantly, the dominant trend among Strauss scholars has been to emphasize Strauss's writings on European thought and Judaism. This is particularly the case in the discussion of Strauss's writings on Islamic thought, which tend to be read mainly through the lens of scholars' own concern with Jewish thought. This, of course, is understandable in view of the fact that Strauss scholarship has been for a long time plagued by controversial issues which kept most scholars away from Strauss in general, and few people who, because of their training, background, and connection with the Straussian "school," showed interest in Strauss's writings tended to concentrate either on the larger picture or only reacted to Strauss's writings as far as they had an overlap

<sup>160</sup> Among the most important examples is the following collection of essays: Rafael Major, ed., *Leo Strauss's Defense of the Philosophic Life: Reading "What Is Political Philosophy?"* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013). For other notable examples see Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss*; Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*; Heinrich Meier, *Political Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion*, trans. Robert Berman (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Ying Zhang, "The Guide to The Guide: Some Observations on 'How To Begin To Study The Guide of the Perplexed,'" *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 46, no. 3 (2020): 533–65.

with their own intellectual projects. Understandable as the generalist approach to Strauss's writings is, there is a place to concentrate exclusively on Strauss's writings on Islamic philosophy. These writings also have an internal coherence which justifies their treatment independently of European and Jewish thought. In view of these points, the present study concentrates on Strauss's works on medieval Islamic thought while taking into account two recently discovered transcripts, interpreted in the first two chapters of this volume. In my interpretation of Strauss's writings, as can be seen above all in the third and fourth chapters of this volume, I will pay close attention to the esoteric character of Strauss's works and take the details of his writing into account.